I-CLA!M

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

Country report

Discourses about irregularised migrants at the EU level

Representation and narratives in media, politics, and civil society

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Executive Summary

This I-CLAIM report examines how irregularised migration is framed[2] at the EU level across the European Commission, the European Parliament, and EU civil society. Using both quantitative and qualitative analysis, the report reveals diverse approaches and thematic differences across different topics, including border control, rights, employment, gender, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, returns and 'crisis' narratives.

Based on the collected data sample, the Commission's narratives largely emphasise policy, control, and regulated migration pathways, with frequent focus on border security and return processes. The Parliament's discourse varies by political group, ranging from rights-based approaches to security-focused and/or crime-focused rhetoric. In contrast, civil society prioritises human rights concerns, often challenging securitised framings and advocating for more inclusive policies.

Through comparative insights, the report identifies both convergences and unique aspects of each EU actor's stance and narratives and how they are developed in connection to different topics of interest for the I-CLAIM project. A longer and more detailed version of this Report will be available on the CEPS website.

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[2] The Report is informed by the notion of *irregularity assemblages* (Gonzales et al., 2019; Sigona et al., 2021; I-CLAIM, 2023): irregularity is not an intrinsic and fixed characteristic of some individuals but rather the result of a nexus of nested legal systems and political and public discourses on irregularity which must be examined in the context of the specific labour market and welfare regimes unevenly impacting individuals depending on their national origin, gender, class, and belonging to racialised communities. The main purpose of this Report is to analyse the 'discursive construction of irregularity', i.e., how different actors employ and promote specific narratives surrounding the topic of irregularity and lack of regular migration and/or residence status in Europe. In addition to this, the Report also covers broader themes related to labour migration, employment, gender, the effects of and response to the Covid-19 pandemic, returns and 'crisis' narratives. Drawing on this, the Report refers to third-country nationals (TCNs) without a regular immigration or residence status as irregularised people.

1. Introduction

This short report presents the findings of a large-scale corpus analysis of text addressing irregularised migrants and migration by the European Commission, the European Parliament and EU civil society. To keep this report succinct, all methodological details are published in a separate document (methodological note) and a comprehensive report will be released in due course.

The short report describes the data sample and gives the most salient quantitative and qualitative results for the lexical and narrative dimension of the texts analysed. This is followed by comparative insights contrasting the European Commission, the European Parliament and EU-level civil society, and general conclusions that combine the quantitative and qualitative perspective. The present version of the Report only covers the topics of migration and irregularity, but broader discussions on employment, gender, the effects and response to Covid-19, return and 'crisis' are included in the longer version.

Unlike the national reports, the EU-level report does not examine the media but unpacks the broader category 'politics' examining the European Commission and the European Parliament. The longer version of the report also delves into the specificities of the discourse and narratives of high-level Commission officials in 2020-2024 with competencies over migration, as well as the different political groups within the European Parliament. Based on the quantitative analysis and statistically significant findings, the Report makes claims on the discourse of the institutions as a whole, differentiating among different actors where relevant and appropriate. These claims do not necessarily reflect the views, discourse or opinions of the institutions as a whole, but refer to general statistical trends observed in the data sample collected and analysed for each actor for the purposes of this Report.

2. The discursive construction of irregularity in the European Commission

2.1. Data Sample

The European Commission corpus includes 565 texts (public statements and press releases) from the European Commission (859 351 tokens). They were retrieved through the official website of the European Commission and relevant debates held at the European Parliament where Commission officials were represented.

Source	Texts	Tokens
COM General	298	---
Von der Leyen	60	---
Schinas	39	---
Johansson	137	---
Total	565	859 351

2.2. Quantitative analysis

High frequency words for the Commission include: *eu, member, states, European, our, migration, commission, support, new, people, union, asylum, need, border, work, Europe, cooperation, state, national, third, rights, directive, protection, return, migrants, country, social, labour, measures.*

For each semantic group, the most frequent terms include:

- Governance, (109.54): 'EU' (10.133), 'member' (6.868), 'states' (5.488)

- Time and Space (44.292): 'countries' (2.690), 'Europe' (2.023), 'national' (1.836)

- Borders and Migration (39.756): 'migration' (3.938), 'border' (2.346) and 'third' (mostly used as 'third-country nationals'; 1.836).[3]

- Rights (35.033): 'Asylum' (2.409), 'rights' (1.798) and 'protection' (1.736)

- Subject (25.964): 'Their' (3.513), 'people' (2.556), 'they' (2.340) and 'children' (1.164)

- Work and Economy (23.055): 'work' (2.266), 'labour' (1.510) and 'skills' (1.037)

- Welfare and Services (20.453): 'support' (3.073), 'social' (1.514) and 'access' (1.090)

- Policing and Crime (13.233): 'Security' (1.147), 'authorities' (1.153) and 'trafficking' (0.896)

- Crisis and Defence (10.181): 'against' (0.920), 'challenges' (0.869) and 'crisis' (0.702).

- Numbers and Quantities (7.693): 'one' (1.297), 'first' (1.019) and 'million' (0.891)

- Returns and Expulsion (4.665): 'return' (1.698), 'returns' (0.469) and 'voluntary (0.447)

- Obligations (1.984): 'integration' (1.111), 'obligations' (0.237) and 'responsible' (0.230)

- IOs and NGOs (1.453): 'organisations' (0.406), 'civil' (0.382) and 'organisation' (0.114) + UNHCR (0.078) and IOM (0.073).

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[3] Migration and status are in Borders and Migration. Asylum is in Rights. There is a substantial legal difference between these terms and this has to be taken into account.

Figure 1 below shows the overall distribution of words across all semantic groups and subgroups for the European Commission:

Figure 1: Semantic group analysis for the European Commission (2019-2023) - visualised

For collocations with *migra* terms[4], the semantic group of Borders and Migration emerges as the most prominent (sum likelihood of 4605.330). The dominant collocation result is 'irregular' (2041.748) underscoring the Commission's specific focus and preoccupation on people in a situation of irregularity compared to other types or aspects of cross-border mobility. The high presence of governance-related terms (3581.062), including Policy and Legislation suggests that the discourse is heavily focused on the legal and

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[4] This includes the words *migration, migrants, migrant, migratory, immigration, immigrants, immigrant, migrate, migrating, emigrate* and *emigration*.

policy framework for migration control (e.g. 'pact' at 939.411). The Rights semantic group, while present (1952.804), is very much limited to the Asylum/Refugees subgroup (i.e., 'asylum', 'refugees' and 'displacement') and much less or not at all on other subgroups, such as Fundamental Rights (78.673; including terms like 'right' and 'free'[5]). Among the most prominent collocation results are 'asylum' (1625.34) and 'refugees' (165.294). *Migra* words also show important collocations with Policing and Crime and Crisis and Defence with 1608.957 and 877.014 respectively. Significant results in the two groups are with 'smuggling' (1246.388) and 'instrumentalisation'[6] (244.017). Such associations suggest a discourse that problematises human mobility through the lens of criminality and geopolitics/defence, rather than through a rights-based or humanitarian perspective, and sidelines the lived experiences of the people in question.

In the case of collocations with 'irregular', the dominance of the Borders and Migration group is even more pronounced (4049.913), with a clear focus on controlling entry into the EU and migration status. The main collocation results are 'migration' (1230.389), 'arrivals' (923.004), 'migrants' (723.371) and 'crossings' (205.931).Most of the emphasis in the discourse seems to be on the specific act of crossing the border, on *preventing*, *reducing* and *responding* to cross-border movements – as opposed to anything related to their stay and residence. This is also proven by the greater prevalence of the semantic groups Crisis and Defence (466.173), particularly in relation to Defence, as well as Crime and Policing (243.150), predominantly in relation to smuggling and facilitation but also encompassing a more general idea of 'illegal', 'crime' and '(internal) security'. 'Irregular' only shows modest collocation results with the semantic groups on Rights (80.607) and Work and Economy (124.421) – mostly limited to the Employers Sanctions Directive and, therefore, criminal sanctions for people employing workers without regular immigration and residence status.

The collocation analysis for the word 'refugee' reveals a different focus from other terms. Time and Space emerges as the semantic group with the highest likelihood value (1249.037). The Geography subgroup is particularly prominent, indicating that refugee discourse often focuses on the geographical origins and locations of refugees. Specific terms like Turkey (440.845), Syrian (251.546), Venezuelan (147.254), and Ukrainian (136.948) are notable within this group. Unlike for migration-related terms and 'irregular', the Welfare and Services group (546.192) also plays an important role in the refugee-related discourse, with a significant focus on areas like inclusion and social protection.

The analysis of employment-related terms (*work*[7], *labour, and *employ*[8]) and their collocations also yields important insights. Here, employment and economy-related terms overwhelmingly dominate the discourse (8891.037), indicating that these words mostly correlate with other terms within the same semantic group. This suggests that employment and migration are often treated as separate issues with limited overlap in the Commission's discourse. The first migration-related term among the collocation results is not 'migration' but 'mobility', which only applies to EU citizens. Excluding Work and Employment, the sum likelihood for

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[5] Mostly as 'free movement'

[6] This term entered the EU migration debate around the events that took place in 2022-23 at the border between Belarus and Latvia, Lithuania and Poland and the involvement of Lukashenko's regime in 'facilitating' irregular border crossing into the EU (for a critique, see Carrera et al., 2023).

[7] This includes the words *work, working, workers, worker, works, worked, workforce, workplace, workshops, workload, workable, workplaces, workshop, workflow, workflows, workstreams, workweek* and *workwill*.

[8] This includes the words *employment, employers, employed, employer, unemployment, employees, employing, employ, employability, unemployed* and *employs*.

the other semantic groups appears to be more evenly spread with Welfare and services at 765.863, Governance at 728.282, Borders and Migration at 644.102, Subject at 639.413, Policing and Crime at 457.217 and Rights at 371.471.

Significant differences can be observed in how the Commission speaks about men, women, and children. Overall, men are mentioned infrequently, with only 135 occurrences. Women are referenced nearly four times as often, with 499 occurrences, while children are mentioned 1 845 times, i.e., almost 14 times as much. Collocations for women frequently include terms like 'victims', 'vulnerable', 'exploitation', and 'violence'. The specific collocation results for the female-related terms and the much lower frequency of male-related terms in the corpus suggest that, when it comes to men, their gender is normally not spelt out. In other words, unless 'female' or 'woman' is specified, then a 'migrant' is more likely to be considered a subject to be managed, associated with policing and crime and notions related to crisis and defence, than a 'victim' or somebody requiring protection due to gender-specific needs.

2.3. Qualitative analysis

One of the key findings in the analysis of the Commission corpus is that policymakers tend to speak about social phenomena through a heavily policy- and legislation-dominated language. In other words, their discourse does not always contain narratives (i.e., a subject, action verb, setting, or means) but is more descriptive, passive or centred around the Commission's actions, legal and policy instruments, their purpose, functioning and implementation. This is most likely due to the Commission's role under the EU Treaties as initiator of EU legislation in this domain (see Boswell, 2008; Carrera & Colombi, 2024).

Some of the proto-narratives[9] identified were the following:

- *The European Union must strengthen border management to prevent irregular migration, ensure people's safety, including through partnerships with third countries and combat smuggling of migrants and trafficking of human beings.*

- *The EU must enhance legal pathways to attract talent and skilled workers to support innovation, competitiveness and address labour market needs.*

- *The EU must work on more effective returns for people who have no right to stay.*

The selected statements below show the Commission's approach on regular migration and the prevention of irregular migration:

> *It is very important to return irregular migrants to break the narrative of the smugglers and to send out the strong message that it is the legal pathways that will bring you to Europe, and choose them. (VDL 06-10-2023)*

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[9] Proto-narratives are analytical abstractions based on the results of the quantitative result and seek to identify recurring patterns in the discourse of the European Commission, European Parliament and civil society. While based on statistical data, the proto-narratives do not account for the internal fragmentation of these actors and are only used as a heuristic devices to better illustrate specific patterns identified in the discourse of each actor.

Creating legal pathways for migration not only has economic benefits; it can help reduce irregular and unsafe migration as well as the human and economic costs associated with smuggling and trafficking. (COM General 18-12-2022)

The better we are in legal migration, the more convincing we can be in preventing irregular migration (VDL 28-11-2023).

All three statements frame 'irregular migration' as a problem to be solved through returns and 'legal' (or better, regular) pathways. Ursula von der Leyen's first statement emphasises that returning irregular migrants is crucial to undermining smugglers' narratives and promoting regular pathways. The framing of regular migration as a more attractive and preferable alternative to irregular routes is repeatedly emphasised, suggesting that the Commission sees the establishment of 'regular pathways' as instrumental in controlling cross-border mobility. The statements clearly prioritise border control and deterrence over other issues, as well as a selective and utilitarian approach to regular migration.

However, this narrative is somewhat contradictory. Despite implying that the effectiveness of preventing irregular migration is directly tied to the success of regular migration frameworks, current EU legislation and policies have not substantially expanded the available regular pathways, which particularly affects people from certain world regions. This approach risks marginalising those who do not fit into the 'legal' categories favoured by current EU policies, reinforcing a selective and exclusionary migration system.

Additionally, these statements reveal a lack of consideration for evidence showing that restrictive border and visa policies, in the absence of 'effective regular pathways' for labour and regular mobility for third-country nationals (TCNs), contribute to pushing people towards 'irregular' routes into the EU and, therefore, increase their reliance on smugglers (see Nare et al., 2024).

Moreover, the Commission's emphasis on 'returns' and 'regular pathways' does not sufficiently address the complex factors driving behind irregularised migration or question whether the policies in place are co-constitutive of this phenomenon. By focusing predominantly on control measures, the discourse overlooks human rights obligations and the rights of asylum-seekers and migrants under national, EU and international law reproduces discriminatory and racist assumptions behind the very label of 'migrant'.

The statement below, given by Vice-President Margaritis Schinas, is also indicative of how migration and integration are seen by the Commission:

Legal migration is a two-way street. We in the European Union will allow for legal avenues, we will admit migrant workers, we will work to improve their conditions and we will struggle to give them fair access to our systems, but they should also accept our rules, our values and our model of society. This is the two-way street that we need. Those who come to Europe need to accept and respect the role of women in the family, in society and in the workplace. They should accept the need for peaceful co-existence, for religious freedom and tolerance and for full respect of the ethical rules that govern living in Europe. (Schinas 23-11-2021)

VP Schinas frames 'migration' as a reciprocal process, emphasising that while the EU offers legal avenues and strives to improve conditions for 'migrants', there is an expectation that migrants will assimilate by accepting European values and societal norms. He specifically focuses on the role of women, peaceful coexistence, religious freedom, tolerance and respect for the ethical rules that govern life in Europe. The underlying morale that emerges from such a statement is that at least part of the people in question (i.e., migrant workers) do not respect these principles

This approach is closer to assimilation than to inclusion and sheds a negative light on multiculturalism and diversity, contrasting with the EU's commitments to equality, non-discrimination, respect for fundamental rights, as well as its founding values. By placing the onus on migrants to accept and respect European values, the discourse overlooks the barriers TCNs face, such as (oft-institutionalised and structural) discrimination or xenophobia, which can impede successful integration regardless of individual willingness (see Carrera, 2009).

3. The discursive construction of irregularity in the European Parliament

3.1. Data sample

For the European Parliament, the data sample includes 1,380 documents (799 618 tokens): 1 365 statements from individual Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and 15 press releases from the Parliament as an institution. These documents were retrieved from the official website of the European Parliament and include speeches, debates, and press releases covering migration-related topics from 2019 to 2023.

Source	Texts	Tokens
European Parliament	1 380	799 618

3.2. Quantitative analysis

High-frequency words for the Parliament include: *we, European, our, people, president, union, they, Europe, their, eu, states, need, member, us, rights, migration, countries, border, commission, human, borders, time, asylum, right, citizens, commissioner, years, against, law, parliament.*

For each semantic group, the most frequent terms include:

- Governance (69.807): 'European' (7.266), 'president' (4.086), and 'union' (3.691)

- Time and Space (51.341): 'Europe' (3.305), 'countries' (1.926), and 'time' (1.600)

- Rights (35.262): 'rights' (2.189), 'human' (1.738), and 'asylum' (1.593)

- Subject (27.717): 'people' (4.187), 'they' (3.633), and 'their' (2.650)

- Borders and Migration (23.698): 'migration' (1.961), 'border' (1.902), and 'borders' (1.675)

- Welfare and Services (13.858): 'support' (1.118), 'help' (0.792), and 'social' (0.598)

- Crisis and Defence (11.487): 'against' (1.353), 'war' (0.784), and 'security' (0.649)

- Numbers and Quantities (12.571): 'one' (1.903), 'first' (1.013), and 'million' (0.891)

- Policing and Crime (7.905): 'illegal' (0.817), 'security' (0.649), and 'order' (0.598)

- The Work and Economy (7.255):'work' (1.153), 'labour' (0.810), and 'skills' (0.093)

- Returns and Expulsion (1.527): 'Return' (0.388), 'procedures' (0.265), and 'relocation' (0.118)

- Obligations (1.103): 'integration' (0.249), 'responsible' (0.220), and 'duty' (0.189)

- IOs and NGOs (1.078): 'ngo' (0.051), 'organisations' (0.065), and 'civil' (0.045).

Figure 2 below shows the overall distribution of words across all semantic groups and subgroups for the European Parliament:

Figure 2: Semantic group analysis for the European Parliament (2019-2023) – visualised

The collocation analysis of the key term '*migra*' reveals a clear focus on governance, illegality and border control in the European Parliament's discourse. The semantic group 'Governance' stands out with a likelihood value of 1899.260. Among the main words in this category are 'pact' (690.041), 'policy' (575.595) and 'legal' (354.862), which clearly reflect the work of the Parliament over new legislative files, including the Pact. Policing and crime-related terms also show prominence, with a likelihood value of 1800.64, mostly attributable to one single term: 'illegal' (1715.192). Notably, 'illegal' happens to be the single word with the highest likelihood value among all collocation results for *migra*. In other words, within the data sample, MEPs are significantly more likely to define (im)migration or (im)migrants as 'illegal', instead of 'irregular' or any other term. This is also confirmed by the frequency of the two terms in the whole data sample, with 'illegal' showing a normalised frequency of 0.817 and 'irregular' of 0.139.

The 'Borders and Migration' semantic group follows closely with a sum likelihood of 1466.628. In this case, the terms most likely to be associated with *migra* are 'irregular' (389.571), 'flows' (332.43) and 'routes' (139.623). The 'Rights' semantic group has a likelihood value of 906.223, with a heavy emphasis on asylum and refugees (768.375), rather than fundamental rights or violations. This is mostly due to the frequent juxtaposition of *migra* terms with 'asylum' (621.450) and 'refugees' (103.005) in expressions such as 'asylum and migration policy', 'Pact on Migration and Asylum' or in general discussions surrounding human mobility. The 'Crisis and Defence' semantic group follows with a likelihood of 526.212 and words such as 'crisis' (179.469) or 'pressure' (132.412). With a sum likelihood of 529.859, the semantic group 'Numbers and quantities' is particularly prevalent among these collocation results. Among the individual words in this group, a majority indicate abstract or figurative quantities, i.e., mass, flow, wave, flood, and even those that are more specific (i.e., thousands, hundreds) are used in indefinite ways and not to indicate specific quantities – e.g. 'there are hundreds/thousands of people at the borders'.

The discourse around *irregular* migration in the European Parliament is predominantly focused on border control and the legal status of migrants. The Borders and Migration group dominates with a sum likelihood of 519.207, particularly focused on entry (96.096; including words like 'crossings', 'arrivals', 'routes' and 'flows') and status (367.808; including words such as '(im)migration', and '(im)migrants'). The focus is largely on controlling and preventing irregular entry into the European Union – i.e., 'reduce' and 'fight' respectively at 29.289 and 15.875, with little discussion about the social or economic conditions of irregular migrants post-entry. Much richer are the collocations with the term 'illegal', showing a clear preoccupation with securitisation and criminalisation but also, much less prominently, with fundamental rights violations. The Borders and Migration semantic group shows a high sum likelihood of 2137.323 with a focus on border control (81.302) and entry (215.286), as well as migrant status (1840.735). The Rights semantic group comes next with 273.175, exclusively concentrated in the Violations subgroup with terms such as 'pushbacks' (121.437 as a single word; 'push' at 70.750 and 'backs' at 64.810[10]). This clearly shows the two ways 'illegal' tends to be used across the political spectrum.

Collocations within the Crisis and Defence group also reflect a strong focus on security and defence, with a likelihood of 237.646, primarily concerning defensive measures (237.646) and therefore with words such as 'against' (50.320), 'prevent' (37.955) or 'invasion' (24.843). Policing and crime are prominent, with a sum of 169.548, particularly in relation to smuggling and trafficking.

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[10] The software used for the analysis divides words if they contain a hyphen. In this case, 'push-backs' is divided as 'push' and 'backs' as two distinct words.

For the term *refugee*, the European Parliament's discourse shifts to some extent, with the Time and Space semantic group showing the highest likelihood (732.807), particularly in relation to geography (732.807). This reflects the EP's focus on specific countries of origin, events or agreements with third countries – specifically, Ukraine (95.818 , plus 'Ukrainian' at 326.278), Syria (20.851; 'Syrian' at 124 969), Afghanistan ('Afghan' at 51.812), Turkey (38.971), Moria in Greece (36.803) and Venezuela ('Venezuelan at 21.072). The category of Rights is much more central in the discussion surrounding refugees, with a likelihood value of 531.576, but is mostly made up of terms related to asylum (504.293), such as 'camp(s)' (114.270 in the plural form and 60.123 in the singular form), 'convention' (54.535) and 'Geneva' (47.177). There is also a moderate focus on welfare and services (76.31), particularly on care and relief (52.137), inclusion (24.173), and crisis and defence (128.958 total; 'war' at 81.723). Among other things, this shows an increased attention to the welfare, wellbeing and rights of refugees compared to other categories of TCNs, as was also the case for the Commission.

Employment-related terms, such as *work**, *labour*, and **employ**, show a strong focus on economic aspects. The Work and Economy group has a sum likelihood of 1128.629, with the bulk of the attention on employment and work (1092.205). The most prevalent terms in this group are 'market' (417.47), 'skilled' (175.748), 'shortages' (65.869) and 'seasonal' (63.916). The Borders and Migration group only has a moderate presence with a sum likelihood of 112.431, indicating a limited overlap between discussions on migration and employment. 'Migration' is the word from this semantic group with the highest likelihood value at 46.033. More prevalent are the semantic groups of Welfare and Services (323.778) and Governance (201.143). This suggests that employment and economic concerns are more closely linked to welfare and governance than to migrant workers, which remain a relatively minor focus in discussions on work and the economy.

Women and gender-related terms are frequently discussed in the EP's migration discourse. With 615 occurrences, women are a central focus, particularly in relation to other words related to social identity (2074.836 likelihood in the 'Subject' group). Women are often discussed in vulnerable contexts, with collocations focusing on lived experiences (151.559), particularly exploitation, violence, and other forms of gender-based harm. This is also visible from the significant attention to rights violations against women, with the Rights semantic group showing a sum likelihood of 435.68. In contrast to women, men are mentioned far less frequently, with 197 occurrences, and mainly in relation to other words from the Subject semantic group (784.796 likelihood), including 'women' at 436.310 and 'children' at 173.772. This means that words such as men or male are mostly used in an explicit way in expressions such as 'men, women and children' and not by themselves. An exception is the word 'young' (121.465), which is used to speak about 'young men' and carries a different connotation. Unlike women, men are rarely framed as victims, and the discourse does not emphasise their vulnerabilities to the same extent.

Among the three, children dominate the data sample with 1036 occurrences. The EP's discourse emphasises the social identity of children (1452.158 likelihood in the Subject group) and their lived experiences (856.366). This suggests a strong focus on children's rights, particularly in terms of protection, education (223.393), and inclusion (45.007). Welfare and Services also has a significant presence, indicating that the EP prioritises children's access to services and their overall well-being in migration contexts. This reflects a humanitarian approach, focusing on children's need for protection, family reunification, and support. Different nationalities are more likely to be associated with the three categories of terms: among women, Afghans and Ukrainians; among men, Syrians; among children; Ukrainians and – to a lesser extent – Palestinians from Gaza.

3.3. Qualitative analysis

Some of the identified proto-narratives for the European Parliament are the following:

- *The EU must strengthen its external borders to prevent irregular migration and increase returns of those without the right to stay.*

- *The EU must enforce strict measures against illegal migration to protect national sovereignty, the integrity of European borders and prevent crime.*

- *The EU must protect refugees' rights, ensure effective reception systems and their integration into European societies.*

The statements below well-exemplify a number of different narratives and ideological positions discernible across the data sample.

> *Yes, we need to protect the external borders better. Yes, we need to tackle human smugglers more fiercely. Yes, we must promote the return of irregular migration. But above all we must work on a real European asylum and migration policy. (Renew 12-09-2023)*

> *We have the obligation to provide guarantees to those who need international protection, but we must also protect our borders from external threats that endanger the safety of our citizens. For this reason, a political migration policy is efficient, coherent and comprehensive. And to do this, the European Union must use all the instruments at its disposal, not only domestic policy, but also development cooperation or commercial policy, conditioning agreements with our neighbours and partners on their collaboration for the return of irregular migrants and the fight versus the mafias. (EPP 10-05-2023)*

First of all, as underlined in the collocation analysis, 'irregularity' is mainly connected to external border crossings, entry into the EU territory and arrivals of TCNs. In both the Renew and EPP statements above, one can notice an insistence on external border controls. Specifically, the Renew MEP pairs border controls with the fight against human smuggling and the promotion of returns. The EPP MEP combines it with the protection of 'our citizens' from 'external threats', cooperation and commercial agreements with neighbouring third countries to facilitate returns and fight against criminal activities ('the mafias'). While both of these statements emphasise the commitment to 'a real European asylum and migration policy' and 'guarantees to those who need international protection', the overall focus is on irregularised migration as something that is inherently connected to criminality – sometimes with the migrants themselves as victims and sometimes as the perpetrators – and on returns as the one desirable solution to solve the 'issue' at hand.

Clear differences emerge with the statement below from a MEP from the Greens:

> *The cost of the EU's ways of combating irregular migration is high – human rights, human dignity, and even human lives. But the EU is willing to pay that price, giving up any pretension of upholding its values at the borders. The external borders are common borders and this comes with a common responsibility to share the numbers of asylum seekers and ensure that people can flee persecution. They must be rescued and protected. And when some of my EPP colleagues call for solidarity, they often mean fences, deterrents, criminalisation of humanitarian aid. That is not solidarity, that's being partners in crime. (Greens 18-04-2023)*

Discourses about irregularised migrants at the EU level

The MEP in question is openly criticising the current migration and asylum policies of the EU, including the insistence on harshening controls at the external EU borders. Human rights, human dignity and human lives are described as the main victims of the EU's fight against irregularised migration – with the EU values being directly undermined by such actions. Emphasis is put on the obligation to rescue people, ensure protection and effectively share responsibilities across the EU in a genuine way. In this case, there is a direct attack to the EPP and, specifically, the alleged use of 'solidarity' as a way to push for stricter border controls, including the construction of fences, deterrence, and the criminalisation of civil society actors. Crime, in this case, is associated with policymakers and their being complicit in people's death due to their support for stringent policies. The statement in question effectively illustrates the inherent contrast between non-derogable fundamental rights and the EU values with the current policies adopted by the EU.

Diametrically opposite are the statements below by MEPs from ECR and ID:

You did realise that eight out of ten migrants are men. Where did your gender equality go, hon? Shouldn't there have been some ratio? This misconstrued tolerance, I conclude, Madam President, and misconstrued solidarity have led to attacks, threats and assassinations. This needs to change. (ECR 19-01-2021)

While we are experiencing a real migratory submersion, which would require strong measures, Commissioner Johansson still refuses to finance walls and barriers at Europe's borders, under the pretext that the European Union does not have funds to spend for that. However, the Commission is much less careful about financial resources when it comes to subsidizing certain associations and promotional campaigns on the future of Europe with the Islamic veil. What credibility can be given to the measures announced by Mrs. von der Leyen to deal with the migration crisis, while at the same time she maintains a pro-immigration position? By wanting to intensify the corridors described as 'humanitarian' to encourage mass immigration and by wishing to attract more supposedly qualified workers, Brussels continues to create air calls, suction pumps, which many candidates for migration will follow The European Union must, however, control its borders, stop funding water taxi NGOs for migrants, stop legalizing illegal immigration, send back to their countries of origin all those who must leave and no longer give a euro to States. who would not take back their nationals. This is a vital question for the future of Europe. It is high time to show common sense and firmness because, if Europe cannot be turned in on itself, it must protect its nationals, its businesses, its identity. Europe will only be strong if the States that make it up are. The exact opposite is happening. We resolutely oppose it.(ID 01-02-2023)

The first statement links migration to crime, gender equality and physical violence at the same time. As underlined in the collocation analysis, men and masculinity are more likely to be associated with physical violence and criminality. In this case, the MEP seems to be arguing in favour of gender quotas for entries into the EU. They directly link the higher percentage of male migrants to indefinite episodes of violence, using this as a critique for other groups' calls for tolerance and solidarity. The second statement also shows a prevalence of crime-related themes – specifically, the association of NGOs with human smuggling and of border crossing with 'illegality'.

Criticisms against the NGOs (referred to as 'water taxis') and the association of migration with 'illegality' are also visible in the statement by the ID MEP. In this case, the MEP in question does not only attack irregularised migration, but also humanitarian corridors and labour mobility for qualified workers. Referring to human mobility as 'migratory submersion' and mentioning 'the future of Europe with the Islamic veil', the

statement depicts migration as an existential threat to European identity, sovereignty and security ('Europe will only be strong if the States that make it up are'). They attack the Commission for being too 'pro-migration' with its approach ('air calls' or 'suction pumps') and emphasise the need for 'common sense', 'firmness' and increased returns to the countries of origin.

4. The discursive construction of irregularity in civil society

4.1. Data sample

The data sample for civil society includes a total of 278 documents (214 753 tokens). These documents are public statements signed either individually or collectively by 16 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and social partners active at the EU level. These include both network-based NGOs and social partners representing organisations within the different Member States and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) with a more transnational focus.

Source	Texts	Tokens
Civil society	278	214 753

4.2. Quantitative analysis

High-frequency words for the EU civil society include: *EU, people, rights, their, European, asylum, migration, children, they, human, Europe, migrants, international, refugees, states, border, member, countries, protection, detention, Greece, them, authorities, support, law, borders, country, access, Greek, commission.*

For each semantic group, the most frequent terms include:
- Rights (70.951): 'rights' (5.122), 'asylum' (4.535), and 'human' (3.455)
- Governance (70.448): 'EU' (10.305), 'European' (4.782), and 'states' (2.929)
- Time and Space (64.395). 'Europe' (3.385), 'international' (3.115), 'countries' (2.300), + 'greece' (1.876), 'libya' (1.411), 'sea' (1.271), and 'years' (0.866).
- Subject (42.914): 'people' (6.789), 'their' (5.113), 'children' (3.995), 'they' (3.799), 'men' (0.754), and 'women' (0.875).
- Borders and Migration (36.530): 'migration' (4.233), 'border' (2.906), and 'migrants' (3.190).
- Welfare and Services (21.932): 'support' (1.774), 'access' (1.630), 'needs' (1.085) and 'health' (0.722).
- IOs and NGOs (14.519): 'Amnesty' (0.959), 'organisations' (0.843) and 'council'[11] (0.834)
- Work and Economy (13.020): 'workers' (1.010), 'work' (0.880), 'labour' (0.838) and 'skills' (0.587)
- Policing and Crime (12.922): 'detention' (2.175), 'authorities' (1.779), and 'police' (0.838).
- Numbers and Quantities (12.088): 'many' (1.192), 'one' (1.136), and 'number' (0.740)
- Crisis and Defence (11.190): 'against' (1.169), 'risk' (1.080), and 'violence' (1.215)
- Returns and Expulsion (2.729): 'return' (0.545), 'returned' (0.335), and 'returns' (0.289)
- Obligations (2.249): 'integration' (0.773), 'responsibility' (0.671), and 'obligations' (0.242).

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[11] While also employed as 'Council of the European Union/EU', in the civil society corpus, the word 'council' is overwhelmingly used in the name of INGOs, e.g., the Greek Council for Refugees and the European Council on Refugees and Exiles, and IOs, i.e., the Council of Europe.

Figure 3 below shows the overall distribution of words across all semantic groups and subgroups for the civil society corpus.

Figure 3: Semantic group analysis for civil society (2019-2023) - visualised

For collocations with *migra* terms, the semantic group Rights emerges as highly significant, with a sum likelihood of 641.425. The most prominent collocates are 'asylum' (263.877), 'refugees' (226.217) and 'seekers' (104.541). The semantic group Governance follows suit with a total sum likelihood values of 633.022. Among the terms in this group, 'pact' has the highest likelihood value (225.896), followed by 'policies' (130.055) and 'policy' (101.959). The semantic group Borders and Migration is slightly less but still significantly prominent in the collocation results with a sum likelihood value of 589.311. Among the most relevant terms are 'irregular' (93.280), 'management' (86.662) and 'undocumented' (66.159). The semantic group IOs and NGOs comes fourth with 449.232 and includes both the name of the specific organisations who have signed the collected

statements and the name of individual experts, executives and advisors from those organisations. Worth noting is also the relatively substantial likelihood value of the semantic groups Subject (115.187) and Work and Economy (114.184).

The word 'irregular' does not appear often in the overall data sample: 70 times overall and only in 35 documents out of the total 278. More often than not, 'migrants' or 'migration' is not juxtaposed to any adjective defining their (ir)regularity, except in the case of direct quotes from legislative and policy documents or when advocating for 'regular/legal' migration pathways. Because of this, the collocation results for 'irregular' are not numerous and are mostly comprised in the Borders and Migration semantic group (221.357), i.e., 'entry' (81.138), 'migration' (63.641) and 'stay' (48.319). The only other two represented semantic groups are Policing and Crime (56.770) – which is fully attributable to 'facilitating' – and Crisis and Defence (18.559) – where it is due to the presence of 'prevent'. Both words are used in direct quotes of legislative proposals or to refer to the EU's or Member States' current policies or practices – thus, used indirectly as a critique of other actors' ways of speaking and not directly to describe reality from a civil society perspective.

The collocation analysis for 'refugee*' shows that Borders and Migration has the highest sum likelihood of 717.664, almost completely due to the word 'migrants' (431.843). With 554.608, the semantic group IOs and NGOs comes next with terms such as 'Council' (128.853), 'Jesuit' (107.527) and 'Danish' (68.904) – which is clearly due to the word 'refugee' being included in the name of several organisations. Time and Space shows a sum likelihood value of 467.976. Among the key collocation results, 'Syrian' (114.892), 'global' (57.887), 'Ukraine' (54.113) and 'world' (47.729). The semantic group Rights follows with 513.826. The main words in this group are 'resettle' (124.573), 'resettled' (92.563), 'resettlement' (61.394) and 'GCR' (i.e., the Global Compact on Refugees; 45.030). Moderate correlation is also noticeable with the semantic groups on Welfare and Services (223.586) and Governance (106.508)

For civil society too, employment-related terms mostly correlate with words in the Work and Economy semantic group (1432.987). Key collocation results include 'market' (359.705), 'shortages' (150.691), 'skills' (102.65) and 'workers' (95.988). Specific labour sectors are identifiable – namely, sex work ('sex' at 85.541), seasonal work ('seasonal' at 57.668), agriculture ('agricultural' at 55.326), domestic work ('domestic' at 35.746) and platform work ('platform' at 31.357) – as well as 'exploitation' (60.365). Borders and Migration is the second most likely semantic group at 474.086, with 'migrant' being the second most likely word associated with the employment-related terms, after 'market'. Other key terms include 'permit' (65.382), 'mobility' (61.109), 'mobile' (49.335). Overall, the disparity in likelihood between Work and Economy and Border and Migration is starkly lower than for the Commission and the Parliament, showing more correlation between employment-related concepts and human mobility. A more moderate but still significant correlation can be observed with the semantic groups Welfare and Services (116.712), particularly in relation to Inclusion and Social Protection (64.648), and Rights (98.299), with 'exploitation' falling in the Violations subgroup.

Significant differences are observed in how civil society addresses family and gender in the context of migration. Frequency data shows that women-related terms ('women', 'girls', 'woman', 'female', 'girl') appear 246 times, while men-related terms ('men', 'man', 'boys', 'boy', 'male') appear 264 times. Children-related terms are far more frequent, appearing 985 times. The collocates for 'women' and related terms are predominantly within the Subject semantic group (1063.395), especially the subgroup on Social Identity (793.228) and Lived Experience (197.873). Significant collocation results include 'men' (312.168), 'children' (202.914), 'pregnant' (142.929) and 'girls' (93.808). Outside of the Subject semantic group, an individual term that shows a high likelihood value is 'Nigerian' at 100.546.

For 'men' and related terms, the collocates also fall mainly within Subject (827.366) and, more specifically, the Social Identity subgroup (783.588). Key collocates include 'women' (298.962), 'old' (124.325), and 'children' (90.747). Like for women, specific nationalities are also among the main collocation results, i.e., Syrian (119.362) and, to a lesser extent, Pakistani (34.662). The semantic group on Crisis and defence shows a significant likelihood value (251.423) and includes words such as 'armed' (98.115), 'masked'[12] (46.594), 'civilian' (42.271) and 'uniforms' (38.631). All of these words appear to be used in contexts of violence against TCNs, i.e., 'men' carrying arms, wearing masks and uniforms attacking TCNs within Europe, at the borders, or in third countries.

Children are a major focus in civil society's discourse, with the Subject group showing a sum likelihood of 1,547.131, particularly within Lived Experience (792.38) and Family/Household (218.991). The most significant collocation results include 'unaccompanied' (634.145), 'women' (241.276), 'families' (163.063), 'men' (115.398), 'vulnerable' (78.28), and 'young' (35.114). Rights and Borders and Migration show modest correlation at 157.125 and 132.792 respectively.

4.3. Qualitative analysis

As noted in the collocation analysis for 'irregular', the notion of irregularity in the civil society corpus is not so frequent. When it is present, it is either a direct quote or reference to the EU and/or Member States' policies and mostly relates to Borders and Migration and Policing and Crime. Accordingly, for this section, the scope was widened to also encompass these themes to see how civil society differs from the other analysed actors.

Overall, all the statements collected and analysed emphasise the same aspects: humanitarian issues at the EU's external borders, the inadequacy and counter-productive nature of EU policies, fundamental rights violations, arbitrary detention at the borders and the criminalisation of civil society actors engaged in search and rescue at sea or offering assistance at the land borders.

> There is an acute and pressing humanitarian imperative to offer assistance and protection to all people on the move, irrespective of their status. To enable this, the EU should encourage and enable the establishment of humanitarian service points – places that provide a welcoming and safe environment for all migrants to access services, without fear of being arrested or reported to the authorities. This would be an important step to help protect the life, dignity and rights of every individual on the move. In recent years, EU actions aimed at countering irregular migration have undermined migrants' rights and humanitarian needs. The suffering witnessed at Europe's sea and land borders is a stark reminder that states should reintroduce a human rights-based approach to border governance.

> While it is important to address the humanitarian consequences of smuggling and trafficking, disproportionate focus on border control and externalisation measures have undermined migrants' wellbeing within the EU and along increasingly dangerous migratory routes. For many, the services of smuggling and trafficking networks are the only option to reach safety and security. With European countries approaching a precarious tipping point where established human rights approaches enshrined in EU and international law are in danger of being irreversibly eroded, we call for migrants' fundamental rights to be upheld, in line European values and standards. Looking beyond restrictive border management responses in the name of deterrence policy, attending to migrants needs and rights is a task of global solidarity. (Red Cross 17-12-2021)

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[12] 'Masked' refers specifically to the act of wearing a mask to conceal one's identity in violent settings – not wearing a mask health-related purposes.

The statement by the Red Cross above clearly exemplifies most of these preoccupations. The starting point is that there is an 'acute and pressing' humanitarian imperative to assist and protect all people on the move, regardless of their immigration or residency status. The main narrative is that EU policies aiming to counter 'irregular' migration have resulted in fundamental rights violations, human suffering at the external borders and 'fear of being arrested or reported to the authorities' for civil society actors providing assistance. Border control and externalisation policies have made all types of human mobility to the EU increasingly dangerous, fostering people's reliance on smuggling and trafficking networks. More broadly, the Red Cross highlights the ongoing erosion of international law, international and EU human rights standards and EU values, urging policymakers to go beyond restrictive border management responses and ensure that protection and assistance are provided to all people on the move, irrespective of their status.

In the statement below, Amnesty International also emphasises similar aspects, with a specific focus on the criminalisation of civil society:

> *Civil society organizations have also been targeted and harassed through the misuse of criminal law. In Croatia, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) Are You Syrious and the Centre for Peace Studies have been harassed, intimidated and prosecuted for 'facilitating irregular migration' after documenting and reporting on people being pushed back with excessive force by police at the borders with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. (…) Since August 2017, the Italian authorities have impounded NGO vessels on multiple occasions, leaving fewer boats available for rescue operations even as the rate of deaths at sea increased in 2018 and 2019.*

> *We volunteered to assist those in need. We could spend 25 years in jail for aiding survivors, but if you ask me now if I would change anything, knowing that my life could be turned upside down as a result, I am telling you that I would do the exact same thing (Amnesty International 03-03-2020)*

The excerpt focuses on the misuse of criminal law against multiple civil society actors. In relation to Croatia, they specifically mention the accusation of 'facilitating irregular migration' for two NGOs who were reporting pushbacks and violence at the borders with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. A second example is humanitarian workers in Italy who were subjected to 'smear campaigns' and were forced to abide by a strict code of conduct which constraints their ability to save people stranded at sea and exposes them to further danger. Italian authorities are accused of impounding NGO vessels, limiting the number of search and rescue actors in the Mediterranean and leading to more numerous deaths. Despite these events, the speaker says, civil society is determined to continue assisting 'those in need' regardless of all penalties they might face, including long-term prison sentences.

In this case, civil society actors emphasise that the notion of 'irregularity' and the rhetorical link with criminality are used by European national authorities to frame civil society as 'facilitators' or 'smugglers' and punish them for aiding people in need or facing danger at the EU borders (see PICUM, 2017.; PICUM, 2024)

Other statements are more focused on the dangers TCNs are exposed to in third countries, and the complicity of the EU:

> In Niger, European pressure to criminalise smuggling and detain migrants has forced more migrants towards perilous underground migration routes. UN reports indicate that authorities in the desert region between Niger and Libya are responsible for over 60 percent of physical abuse against migrant women. Nonetheless, the EU channels funds - earmarked for aid - to these authorities for migration purposes despite their dismal human rights track record. (OXFAM 21-09-2023)

This statement by OXFAM emphasises that 'European pressure to criminalise smuggling and detain migrants' forces people to rely on more unsafe ways to move and exposes them to further dangers, for example gender-based violence perpetrated by official authorities against women between Niger and Libya. The speaker highlights that these are the same authorities who are receiving compensation from EU funds, regardless of the evidence of violence and their human rights violations.

While some MEPs used the notion of 'complicity' against civil society, in this instance, civil society is employing it to hold EU authorities accountable for their financing and support of third-country officials accused of violence and human rights violations. The EU policies aiming at countering 'irregular migration' and, by extension, 'criminalising smuggling and detaining migrants', are the factor enabling this violence.

5. Comparative insights

5.1. Quantitative comparison

Building on the analysis in the previous sections, this Section is going to first compare and contrast the different actors to identify how their preoccupations and specific thematic focuses compare with each other. The keyness results are helpful to identify the distinct linguistic patterns and thematic concerns of the European Commission, the European Parliament and civil society organisations. In each of the subsections below, the three corpora are compared to identify which words the individual actors are statistically more likely to use.

5.1.1. European Commission and European Parliament

Commission	Likelihood	Parliament	Likelihood
EU	3970.729	government	437.075
member	1819.25	question	397.202
labour	1004.202	European	396.091
residence	963.767	talking	387.929
directive	935.173	illegal	359.342
states	912.882	Polish	357.416
third	836.636	problem	334.233
platform	790.565	people	331.884
visa	782.982	unfortunately	312.929
support	782.791	Poland	280.785
skills	758.288	now	268.536
talent	745.808	human	259.553
nationals	744.237	Europe	259.334
return	730.602	certificate	257.894
management	653.189	NGOs	237.468

Table 1: Keyness Analysis - Commission and Parliament

For the Commission, significant keyness results are 'EU', 'member' and 'states', which shows that, compared to the Parliament, the Commission is more likely to speak about the EU as a whole (or at least use the acronym 'EU' as opposed to 'European Union') and about the Member States. One can also notice the higher likelihood for the Commission to focus on specific legislative files ('directive'). On a more substantial level, highly relevant are questions related to employment and the labour market, residence rights, visa policy, return and (migration, border, asylum and crisis) management. The Commission also relies more on the notions of 'talent' and 'skills' in the realm of human mobility and migration – which tend to be limited to highly-skilled workers and to exclude blue-collar migrant workers.

For the Parliament[13], the term with the highest likelihood is 'government', indicating the MEPs' likelihood to comment on specific EU or third-countries' governments' policies. It is followed by 'European' and, more distantly by 'Europe', which may indicate the use of these two words as a peculiarity of the MEPs' language – as opposed to the Commission's higher likelihood to use 'EU'. A more substantive finding is the presence of words such as 'illegal' and 'Polish'/'Poland'. 'Illegal' is more frequent than 'irregular' in the data sample for the Parliament to discuss 'migration', particularly for far-right political groups, and this appears to be a peculiarity of this institution – at least in comparison with the Commission. The high likelihood of 'Polish' and 'Poland' may suggest greater outspokenness by certain national groups of MEPs, higher criticism targeted at national migration and asylum policies, as well as Poland's heightened exposure to the impacts of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, including the resulting human displacement.

Other results might be tied to the specific type of discourse used in the Parliament. 'Problem' is used by MEPs from all political groups to advance their specific concerns and priorities. The likelihood of 'people' can be explained by its frequent use in the spoken language and the higher propensity of the Commission to use specific legal categories to speak about individuals, instead of general terms like 'people'. 'Now' might also appear highly likely due to the more conversational/spoken nature of the Parliament's way of speaking, as well as by a propensity to speak about immediate matters and/or highlight their urgency to advance specific concerns. 'Unfortunately' is also likely to display high levels of likelihood due to its higher frequency in the spoken language. Finally, the likelihood value for 'certificate' (as in the EU Digital Covid Certificate) refers to mentions to this topic in the data sample (and lack thereof in the other data samples), while 'NGOs' shows a specific heightened focus on issues related to the aid and support offered by civil society organisations at the border.

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[13] A majority of the initial results were related to the specificities of the parliamentary debates, their language, procedures and customs ('mr', 'president', 'madam', 'colleagues', 'commissioner', 'ladies' and 'gentlemen'). While they are indicative of the institutional, formal but also conversational tone used in the Parliament, they were screened out to give priority to more substantial terms.

5.1.2. European Commission and civil society [14]

Commission	Likelihood		Parliament	Likelihood
we	882.918		*detention*	1058.136
our	811.72		*people*	760.825
member	643.397		*human*	675.19
visa	404.62		*children*	644.975
Schengen	364.351		*rights*	641.109
directive	341.616		*seekers*	601.804
Commission	306.137		*Libya*	578.315
states	257.404		*refugees*	546.655
citizens	234.707		*Greek*	491.471
cooperation	233.031		*refugee*	476.173
residence	231.781		*Greece*	468.526
union	227.03		*violations*	412.557
together	202.51		*violence*	404.726
work	200.042		*Libyan*	375.292
return	194.213		*sea*	356.315

Table 2: Keyness Analysis - Commission and civil society

The top two results for the Commission in terms of statistical likelihood are 'we' and 'our'. This shows a tendency for the Commission to speak both about itself and collectively in the name of the EU. 'Member States' and the word 'Commission' are also included in the main results, together with 'cooperation' and 'together'. Overall, the remaining words are similar to the results examined in the previous Section 5.1.1: as it was also with the Parliament, compared to civil society, the Commission's main preoccupations mainly relate to visa policy, the Schengen area (and therefore border control and internal free movement), specific legislative files ('directive'), residence rights, 'citizens', 'work' and 'return'. Interesting is the presence of 'citizens' among the main results, which shows the higher centrality of the notion of citizenship in the Commission's discourse and, consequently, the lower importance that civil society gives to it in its own discourse.

Civil society actors under examination, instead, are more likely to focus on individuals and specific categories of people ('people', 'refugee(s)', 'children'), human rights and their violations ('detention', 'human' and 'rights', 'violations', 'violence'), as well as the geographical areas where these take place ('Libya' and 'Libyan', 'Greece' and 'Greek', and 'sea'). Overall, it emerges that the predominant civil society discourse is more directly linked to the lived experience of TCNs, particularly those experiencing degrading treatment, while the Commission's is more confined to a more policy- and legislation-centric discourse.

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[14] For civil society, individual words that were clearly the names of specific NGOs (i.e., Amnesty, MSF, Oxfam) were excluded from the table and the following discussion. The higher statistical prominence of the names of organisations within their own statements is not a significant finding. It must be nonetheless noted that the names of other NGOs could not be removed entirely (e.g., Human Rights Watch, Save the Children, Greek Refugee Council, etc.) which may lead to the overrepresentation of specific words in the results of the quantitative analysis.

5.1.3. European Parliament and civil society[15]

Commission	Likelihood
we	3313.417
our	1130.643
Union	553.569
citizens	376.778
commissioner	320.735
Schengen	290.076
now	288.475
question	205.599
European	169.087
problem	143.918
certificate	133.493
today	112.402
debate	110.649
believe	104.697
Putin	98.266

Parliament	Likelihood
EU	1941.669
detention	1030.229
children	767.756
international	590.115
asylum	555.718
resettlement	529.586
rights	448.274
seekers	443.284
AI	386.273
authorities	379.891
migrants	362.348
refugee	361.935
Libya	350.716
organisations	339.462
refugees	322.294

Table 3: Keyness Analysis - Parliament and civil society

On the Parliament side[16], the main two results for the Commission in terms of statistical likelihood are 'we' and 'our', which shows a higher likelihood for the MEPs to speak using first-person pronouns compared civil society, that is, about themselves, collectively as an institutions and in the name of the EU. 'Union' and 'European' might indicate a higher likelihood for MEPs to focus on the EU and its institutions, as opposed to the more international focus of NGOs. Like for the Commission, the presence of 'citizens' among the main results shows the higher centrality of the notion of citizenship in the Parliament's discourse and, consequently, the lower importance that civil society gives to it in its own discourse.

'Commissioner' reflect the presence of Commission officials in selected parliamentary debates and therefore the higher likelihood for MEPs – at least based on the current data samples – to directly confront Commission officials compared to civil society. More substantive is the presence of the word 'Schengen', which underlines the higher preoccupation of the Parliament with border control and the intra-EU free movement. It can also be assumed that 'question' is more statistically relevant for the Parliament than civil society because of parliamentary procedures. Similarly, 'problem', 'now', 'today' and 'debate' are part of the distinctive language used in the Parliament, with political groups engaging in debates, advancing their specific concerns and priorities, focusing on the present and/or marking the urgency of specific measures. 'Believe' also suggests a higher likelihood to find personal opinions and normative statements in the Parliament's sample. Finally, MEPs seem to be more likely to speak about 'Putin', presumably in relation to geopolitical matters.

When it comes civil society, a number of different topics jump out. Once again, these refer to specific categories of TCNs ('children', 'asylum', 'seekers', 'migrants', 'refugee(s)'), human rights-related issues

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[15] See footnote no. 14.

[16] Once again, most of the initial keyness results were linked to its procedures and way of speaking (i.e., 'president', 'mr', 'madam', 'colleagues', 'commissioner', 'gentlemen' and 'ladies'), and were therefore screened out.

('detention'), geographical locations ('Libya'), resettlement and 'authorities'. Artificial intelligence (AI) also appears as one of the key results for civil society, which is likely due to the presence of statements by data protection and AI-focused NGOs in the data sample. As noted before, this confirms the higher attention of civil society for the lived experience and fundamental rights of people, opposed to the more institutional, policy-oriented language that characterises the Parliament.

5.2. Qualitative comparison

Overall, the European Commission mostly focuses on *reducing*, *countering* and *fighting* against unauthorised border crossings and the need for preventative measures, often looking at 'migration' through the lens of geopolitics and defence and speaking about it with securitarian language.

The statements analysed for the Commission clearly show an emphasis on 'fighting against smugglers and traffickers' and the need for 'regular migration pathways'. Considering the overall lack of existing 'regular pathways', this may suggest an inherent contradiction between the Commission's discourse and the reality of current EU policies. There is also the expectation that TCNs must adapt to 'European values', particularly as regards gender equality, peaceful coexistence, religious freedom and tolerance. These statements reveal the presumption that TCNs do not or cannot respect these 'values', while EU institutions, governments and societies in the Union do. There is also disregard for issues such as institutionalised discrimination, racism and xenophobia, which might act as obstacles for the inclusion of TCNs in the EU.

The European Parliament shows significantly different narratives. Moderate and conservative political groups emphasise the need for 'effective' border control, link – more or less explicitly – migration to illegal activities, and portray returns as the only desirable policy option to 'solve the issue'. Among progressive political groups, there is more criticism against the current EU policies, particularly as regards their contrast with non-derogable fundamental rights and EU values. The far right, instead, often describes migration as 'illegal', tying it with crime, violence and xenophobic ideas on ethnic or cultural replacement, and extending their hostility to NGOs who are seen as 'smugglers'.

Civil society is mainly concerned with how current EU and national migration and asylum policies erode international and EU law, human rights standards and EU values They emphasise – often in more moral/humanitarian terms rather than with direct reference to the law – the legal imperative to provide assistance to all people in distress, regardless of their status, highlight the ongoing criminalisation of assistance by civil society, and the complicity of the EU and its Member States in exposing people to unnecessary danger, violence and human rights violations.

When it comes to employment, there is an overwhelming separation between (irregularised) migration- and employment-related discussions. This suggests that, within the data sample, there are constricted theme-specific bubbles: a discussion on migration and migrants will mainly talk about borders, possibly governance, rights, crisis and defence, or policing and crime but rarely about employment, labour rights and welfare and services; on the other hand, a discussion about employment will mainly encompass employment-related terms, welfare and services and governance, but rarely migration and migrants.

While labour migration is more present in the narratives examined in the qualitative analysis, the rights, wellbeing and living and working conditions of irregularised migrant workers in Europe are virtually absent from institutional statements, with the exception of left-of-centre political groups in the MEPs. The policy

discussions on employments are highly 'selective' and discriminatory, only focusing on 'talent' and 'skills' (i.e., 'highly-skilled' workers) and sidelining blue-collar migrant workers. Civil society, which includes social partners, instead clearly emphasises the entitlement to social rights and decent working conditions for all workers, without discrimination based on immigration status. It also highlights the systemic vulnerability of irregularised migrants to labour exploitation, the obstacles they face to report violations of their rights and their constant being under threat of being reported to the authorities and face deportation.

This also takes shapes through gendered norms and perceptions. The Commission and the Parliament mostly focus on women and children as 'vulnerable' subjects or 'victims'. While the recognition of gender- and age-specific special needs is positive, this is accompanied by an implicit or, in the case of far-right EP political groups, explicit assumption that 'young men' are not real refugees and do not deserve specific protection reception/procedural needs and rights. This in spite of them possibly qualifying for protection on other grounds, such as physical or mental health, their sexuality or gender identity (LGBTIQ+ poeple), etc. Additionally, the silence surrounding masculinity and the differential treatment noticed in the discourses on femininity and childhood indicate that, unless 'women' or 'children' are mentioned, a 'migrant' should be seen as a subject of control – tied to policing, crime, and concepts of crisis and defence, and not as a 'victim' or someone in need of or deserving protection. Non-gender- and non-age-specific needs, which affect categories other than women and children and might still warrant asylum, subsidiary protection or humanitarian residence permits, are virtually absent from this narrative. Civil society, instead, acknowledges gender and age-specific needs in migratory contexts, but focuses on people's lived experience and journeys, not limiting the notion of vulnerability to specific gender categories.

Regarding 'returns', the Commission portrays them as crucial for maintaining the credibility of EU migration policy, despite practical challenges such as legal and logistical obstacles. The Parliament displays stark polarisation, with moderate and far-right MEPs favouring stricter returns policies and outsourcing asylum processes, while progressive groups stressed the importance of fundamental rights, inclusivity and cultural diversity. Civil society strongly criticises the prioritisation of deportations, calling for migration policies that respect fundamental rights and social justice.

In the realm of crisis and defence, the Commission's discourse, especially under President von der Leyen, frames migration as a foreign policy issue, portraying the movement of people, particularly from Belarus and Turkey, as a geopolitical threat or 'hybrid attack'. This narrative emphasises border protection and control, often sidelining legal obligations to assist migrants. Commissioner Johansson, instead, adopts a more humanitarian tone, advocating for regular migration pathways. The main Commission narrative remains focused on border protection and control and depicts migrants as security risks or tools in geopolitical struggles. The Parliament is even more divided, with right-of-centre groups describing unauthorised crossings as a tactic by Belarus and Russia to destabilise the EU, while progressive actors condemn militarised responses and advocate for humanitarian aid and regular pathways. Civil society also criticises the militaristic framing of migration, calling for a focus on human rights and opposing the portrayal of people on the move as security risks.

6. Concluding Remarks

The comparative analysis reveals a nuanced landscape within EU migration discourse, where recurring themes of border control, migration and residence status, rights and employment are interpreted through divergent lenses.

The actors analysed are by no means homogenous actors: individual high-profile Commission officials and the Parliament's political groups show significantly different narratives. Overall, for the European Commission and the European Parliament, 'migration' is mainly understood as a phenomenon to be managed through legislation and policy, particularly in the area of border control, security, crime and defence. Civil society is the only actor that prioritise a rights-based approach to cross-border human mobility and is mostly concerned with human rights and humanitarian issues and the lived experiences of TCNs regardless of status. The overall focus in all three corpora is on the EU's external border, rather than on the living and working conditions of TCNs residing within EU territory.

The European Commission often looks at 'migration' through the lens of geopolitics and defence, often in a competing or uneasy relationship with 'our values', and its discourse surrounding irregularity is focused on *reducing, countering and fighting* against unauthorised border crossings, the need for preventative measures and alleged links with criminality. The Parliament is extremely polarised, with far-right political groups emphasising discussions related to policing and crime, and crisis and defence, more moderate political groups prioritising border controls and questions of EU governance, and progressive MEPs focusing on questions of rights, social justice and discrimination. Civil society employs a rights-based approach which emphasises dignity and protection for all TCNs regardless of their status and advocating for a more inclusive migration policy.

Significant differences are also identifiable in the narratives adopted for different categories of TCNs based on their status. Across all three actors, the likelihood of finding terms related to Welfare and Services significantly grows in the discussions surrounding refugees, compared to those on migration or irregularity. So does the likelihood of Rights-related terms in the European Commission and European Parliament's corpora. Inversely, in migration- or irregularity-related discussions, the prominence of Borders and Migration (mainly ideas related to 'managing', 'flows', etc.), Policing and Crime, and Crisis and Defence significantly increases compared to discussions around refugees.

Discussions on migration and employment are largely disconnected. The Commission and Parliament focus on attracting highly skilled migrants to fill labour shortages, emphasising terms like 'talent' and 'skills', while often overlooking the rights and vulnerabilities of irregularised workers in blue-collar sectors or undeclared work. In contrast, civil society highlights exploitation in sectors like agriculture and domestic work, advocating for the regularisation and protection of all TCNs regardless of status, and shifting the narrative from border security to the actual living and working conditions of third-country nationals within the EU.

For more information regarding employment, gender, Covid-19, return, and crisis and defence, as well as further insights on individual Commission officials and political groups, a longer version of this Report is available on the CEPS website.

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