**I-CLA!M**

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

*Country report*

# Discourses about irregularised migrants in Germany

*Representation and narratives in media, politics, and civil society*

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## Executive Summary

Irregular migration remains one of the most debated topics in contemporary Germany, shaping policies, public opinion, and social cohesion. This I-CLAIM report provides a data-driven analysis of how migration is framed in media, politics, and civil society, revealing critical insights into public discourse. By examining the lexical, narrative, and semantic dimensions of migration-related discourse, this report sheds light on how different actors shape public perceptions, influencing policy and societal attitudes toward irregular migrants. The analysis is based on large-scale corpus data and offers a comparative exploration of how these three domains represent irregular migrants and migration.

The analysis reveals significant differences in how each domain frames the issues of migration and irregularity. In the media, irregular migrants are often depicted through actions and experiences, especially in relation to family dynamics, with a focus on terms like "exploitation," "livelihood," and "flee." Political discourse, on the other hand, centres on policy, control, and security, highlighting terms like "border control," "illegal," and "government," and tends to portray migrants in terms of legality, criminality, and economic impact. Civil society narratives emphasize the lived reality of irregular migrants, focusing on family, rights, dignity, and the humanitarian aspects of migration. Terms such as "human rights," "dignity," and "vulnerable" are common in this domain, presenting a more empathetic perspective on migrants' experiences.

The report also compares the semantic groups and collocations of key terms. While media narratives often frame migration through abstract threats and control measures, political discourse reinforces legal and security concerns. In contrast, civil society narratives humanize migrants, centring on dignity, rights, and lived experiences. This stark divergence in framing influences public attitudes and policy responses in particular ways.

Narratively, the domains differ most significantly. The media and political texts predominantly present abstract, impersonalized narratives, often focusing on the general threat or problem posed by migration. Civil society narratives, however, provide more individualized, personal stories, frequently highlighting the agency of migrants and their experiences in everyday settings. These narratives tend to be more empathetic, giving voice to marginalized groups, including women and families, who are less visible in political and media portrayals.

In conclusion, the report highlights a gap in the expertise and accuracy of both media and political discourse regarding irregular migration, where narratives often lack nuance and reinforce biases. Civil society discourse offers a more balanced and humanized perspective, emphasizing the complexities of irregular migration and its intersection with issues such as family, labour, and vulnerability. This report underscores the urgent need for more balanced and informed migration discourse in media and politics. Misrepresentations and biases not only shape public perception but also affect policy decisions with real human consequences. A shift toward more nuanced and empathetic narratives can foster a more constructive public debate on migration and inform policy makers in evidence-based as well as sustainable manners.

# 1. Introduction

This report presents key findings and conclusions from a large-scale corpus analysis of text addressing irregularised migrants and migration in the domains of media, politics and civil society. To keep this report succinct, all methodological details are published in a separate document (methodological note).

For each domain, this 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 media, politics and civil society, and general conclusions that combine the quantitative and qualitative perspective.

# 2. The discursive construction of irregularity in the media

## 2.1. Data Sample

The data was compiled to reflect the media landscape in Germany in terms of circulation, quality of publication (tabloid – quality), political leaning (progressive – conservative) and regional reach (regional – national). A total of 5,418 texts from a five-year period (1.1.2019 to 31.12.2023) were included. Given the varying sample sizes, comparisons between groupings (quality vs tabloid or progressive vs conservative) must use normalised statistics.

| Name of publication | Spread final quarter 2023 | Political leaning | Quality | No. of texts | No. of tokens[1] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bild | >1 million | conservative-right | tabloid | 1228 | 8,059,337 |
| Zeit | 605,000 | progressive-liberal | broadsheet | 914 | 7,191,921 |
| Faz | 183,000 | conservative-liberal | broadsheet | 842 | 6,648,828 |
| Spiegel | 234,000 | progressive | broadsheet | 957 | 7,215,949 |
| Süddeutsche Zeitung | 281,000 | progressive-liberal | broadsheet | 794 | 6,186,730 |
| Welt | 83,000 | conservative | broadsheet | 683 | 5,549,913 |
| Total number and corpus size | | | | 5,418 | 40,852,678 |

## 2.2. Quantitative analysis

The 10 most frequent individual terms related to irregularised migrants, their working and living conditions, in the media corpus are, in their English translation: *migrant(s)*, *arrival*, *irregular*, *Germany*, *work*, *illegal*, *border*, *Europe(an)*, *politics* and *legal* (*Migranten*, *Ankunft*, *irregular*, *Deutschland*, *arbeiten/Arbeit*, *illegal*, *Grenze/n*, *Europa/europäisch*, *Politik* and *legal*). While the high frequency of 'migrant(s)' and 'irregular' is unsurprising, given the topical focus of our text selection, the prominence of arrival and border suggests a strong

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[1]  In corpus linguistics, a token is defined as any discernible unit in text, most importantly words and numbers.

association of irregularised migrants and arrival, specifically in the form of border crossing and border control, rather than their stay or residency, in German media discourse. Similarly, while Germany might be expected to feature very frequently, the fact that Europe appears nearly as frequently suggests that irregular migration is seen as a European issue – notably, of all the references to Europe, roughly half are to the European Union and its institutions. While labour or work, both as noun and verb, are lexically salient, terms related to the family and household dimension (*Familie, Haushalt, zu Hause*) are less frequently used.

In contrast, precise and legally correct terminology, such as *person finding her/himself in an illegal situation according to the German residence-law* (*Menschen in aufenthaltsrechtlicher Illegalität*), is relatively absent from media discourse, with no occurrence in the tabloid data at all. Similarly, governmental institutions and authorities involved in the production of irregularity and regularity, including asylum, general welfare, education and healthcare, are largely absent from German media discourse on irregularity. Among these, vague references to *the government* itself and to *the police* are the most frequent.
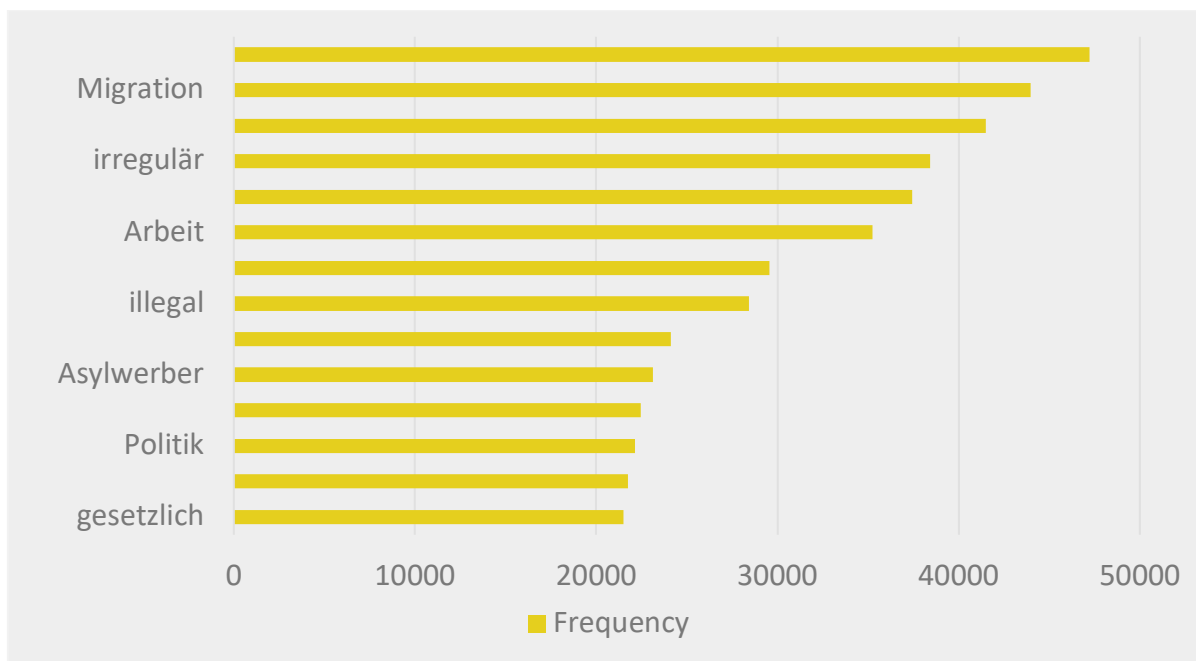


*Figure 1: Salience of individual words by frequency (media corpus)*

As the lexical frequency of individual words does not always reliably indicate which topics are most dominant across a large number of texts, we also analysed large groups of semantically connected words, so-called macro-topics, to comprehensively map the semantic preoccupations in the data.

Across the media, 12 macro-topics, each comprising up to several hundred of individual words, dominate in the following order – with example words listed from highest to lowest frequency:

1. **WORK and LABOUR**, e.g., work, worker, labour market, employee, employer, employed, salary, pay, paid, unpaid, exploit, exploited, exploitation, work place, delivery, agriculture, harvest, delivery, work conditions, economy, earn, livelihood

2. **MIGRATION**, e.g., migrant, migration, status, apply, applicant, asylum, asylum seeker, refugee, residency, tolerated, toleration, flee, flight, illegal, irregular, travel, move, cross, arrival, arrivals, arrive, border crossing, border control, border checks, immigration, immigration authorities

3. **POLITICS and GOVERNANCE**, including subgroups:

   a. THE GOVERNMENT and its democratic institutions, e.g.: government, coalition, German politics, SPD, FDP, Greens, German federal states, communes, federal ministry, federal minister, Chancellor, CDU/CSU, parliament, debate, elections, voting, ministry of interior, ministry for economic affairs, ministry of labour and social affairs

   b. POLICY, e.g., residence act, asylum act, immigration act, policy, regulations, develop, respond, integration course act, freedom of movement act, employment of foreigners act, Dublin, asylum seekers' benefits act, family reunification law

   c. INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS, e.g., European politics, UN, EU, member states, European Commission, European Parliament, Council of Europe, EU Agency for Asylum, Frontex, Europol, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

   d. NGOs and INGOs, e.g., NGO, Pro Asyl, Caritas, Diakonie, Sea-Watch, Refugee Councils, Amnesty International, IOM, Doctors without Borders, Human Rights Watch, Red Cross

   e. LAW AND ORDER, e.g., federal police, police, police officers, law, order, regulations, offence, arrest, detain, observe, processing, deport, deportation, justice, courts, sentence, punishment

4. **STATUS**, e.g., title, status, integrate, integrated, integration, assimilate, adapt, customs, behaviour, fit in, accept, documents, process, accept, deny

5. **RIGHTS and OBLIGATIONS**, e.g., human rights, basic rights, rights, freedom of movement, obligation, duty, requirement, dignity, right to family, children's rights, fair, just

6. **CRIME**, e.g., crimes, theft, commit crimes, criminal, steal, attack, perpetrator, vandalise, sexual assault, rape, violent, rob, robbery, illegal, squatting, victim, hurt

7. **WELFARE**, e.g., health, healthcare, welfare, welfare state, education, childcare, learn, school, insurance, insured, emergency care, hospital, doctor, support, care, welfare policy, assistance, well-being, mental health, housing, homeless, homelessness, training, disabled, disability

8. **COSTS and BURDENS**, e.g., cost, money, threaten, budget, budgeting, burden, to burden, to cost, increased, pay, weigh down, reduce, take away, bind, undermine, destabilise

9. **SUBJECT** (individuals and groups), including subgroups

   a. FAMILY and HOUSEHOLD, e.g., parents, mother, father, children, family, house, household, at home, relatives, marry, marriage, grandparents, sister, brother, uncle, niece, cousin, live, rent

b.  SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE, e.g., live, life, eat, feel, laugh, cry, sleep, hungry, despair, think, say, happy, wait, hope, lonely, move, search, look, take an interest, see, hear

c.  IDENTITIES (including gender, age, ethnicity, religion), e.g., man, woman, child, young, single, married, old, religion, religious, devout, Muslim, Islam, Mosque, Christian, Christianity, service, radical, Imam, Church, churches, mass, beliefs, pray, believers, prayer, Christmas, Easter, communion

10. **NUMBERS and STATISTICS**, e.g., numbers, percent, dozens, hundreds, groups, thousands, mass, wave, influx, increasing, growing, mounting, peak, overwhelming, record

11. **PLACES and GEOGRAPHY**, e.g., Germany, Berlin, cities, Europe, Austria, countryside, Cologne, Mediterranean, sea, countryside, Italy, Ukraine, Lampedusa, borders, Greece, Switzerland, Belarus

12. **CRISIS**, e.g., Covid-19, climate, war, attacks, bombing, shelling, fighting, civil war, unrest, pandemic, Russia, terror, terrorism, catastrophe, collapse, threat, disaster

These macro-topics represent aggregates of the most common topics, each containing high and low frequency words, and comprise the vast majority of content words in the corpus. They do not, however, include every topic (e.g., the weather) or every single word (e.g., articles or conjunctions). When summed up, the frequencies of all terms in each separate group give a comprehensive overview of the German media's preoccupations in relation to irregular migration. They also allow for a comparison between the relative weight given these topics as well as to specific terms.

Notably, more than two thirds of the lexical material refer to migration, its control or administration, and its consequences for Germany and Germans. By comparison, topics that relate to migrants as people or individuals – in contrast to a total aggregate (numbers and statistics) or their status in or in relation to the system – are marginal. Significantly, the macro-topic of WORK AND LABOUR is even more salient than MIGRATION, even though all texts were selected because they address irregular migration (see Fig. 2 below).

If we compare the relative weight given to the sub-topics within POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE and SUBJECT, we see that the German state, its government and democratic institutions (30 %), together with policy (23 %), make up more than half the references (53 %), followed by international institutions (21 %) and law and order (17 %). NGOS and INGOs are comparatively minor aspect of media reporting (9 %).
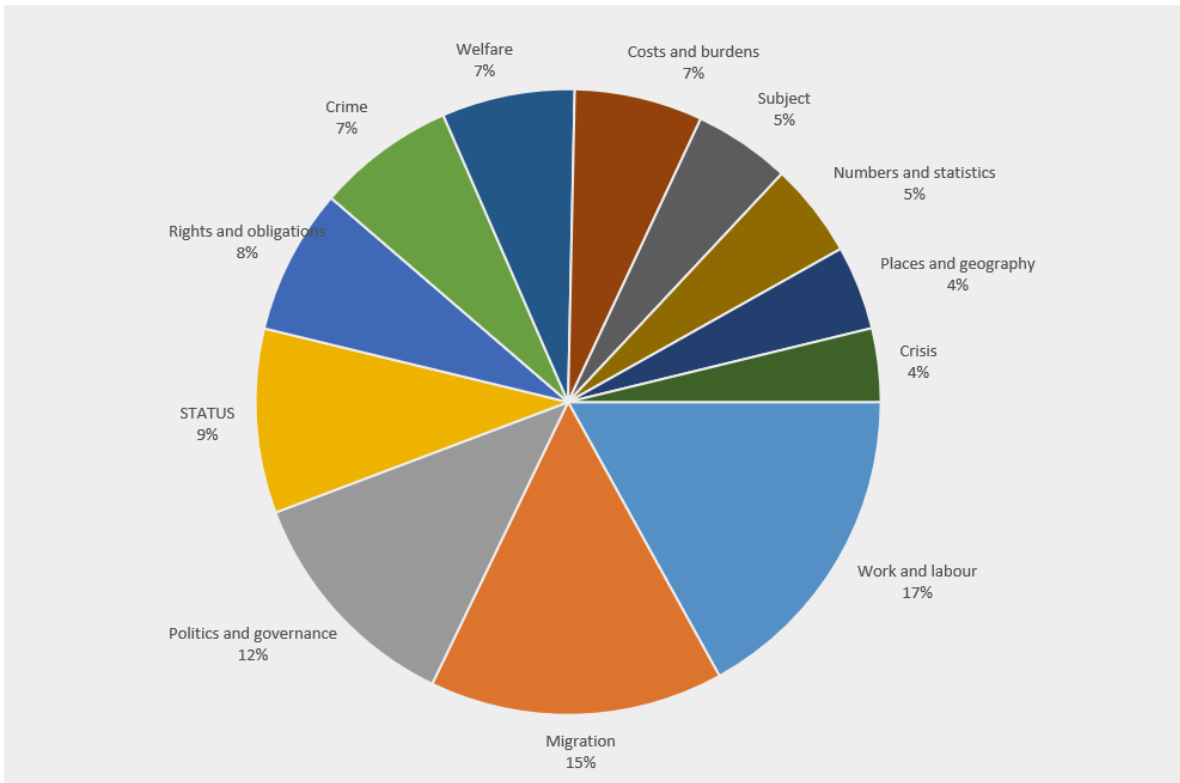
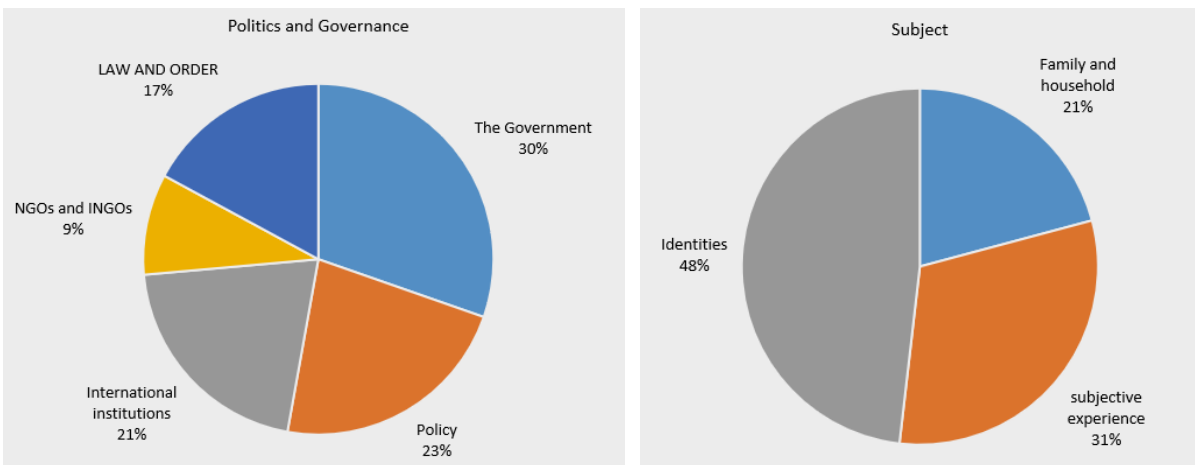Figure 2: Salience of macro-topics (media corpus)



Figure 3: Relative weight of sub-topics in Politics and Governance and Subject

Within the macro-topic of SUBJECT, demographic and other identity labels account for nearly half the lexical material (48 %), followed by people's subjective experiences (31 %) and their family life (21 %). Taken together, references to the lived experience of migrants beyond various administrative systems (their status, integration, labour market, welfare) make up only 5 % of the overall macro-topics.

Given its overall prevalence, the lexical composition of WORK and LABOUR warrants a closer look. The most salient lexical items in this macro-topic reference mainly four aspects: *employers, businesses, the economy*; *workers, labourers*, the *employed* and *unemployed*, the state of being *in work* or *out of it*; the interactional

relationship between them, *jobs* and *sectors, paying, being paid, exploitation, working conditions*; government institutions and NGOS related to employment and unemployment.

Among these, the nouns and verbs denoting *work* and *working* collocate — that is, associate with in a statistically significant way — strongly with words denoting *illegality* and *legality, exploitation, dangers* and *risks*, as well as *agrifood* and *domestic care* sectors (see Fig. 4).

This indicates that, in the context of media reporting on irregularised migration, work is by default associated with questions of *legality*, the exploitation of migrants, *dangers* and risks of (illegal, exploitative) labour, and focused on specific sectors. These powerful associations structure the discursive representation of irregularised migrants and influence public perception.
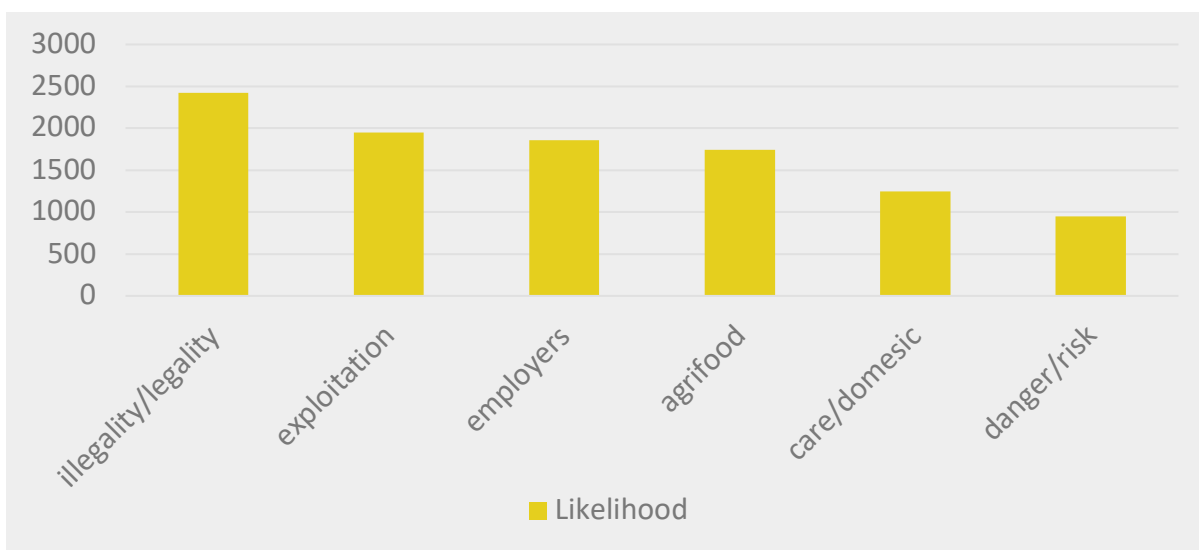


*Figure 4: Collocations of work by statistical likelihood (media corpus)*

MIGRATION constitutes the second-most prevalent macro-topic, comprising abstract notions like *migration, movement, arrival, immigration, irregularity, legality* and *residency*; status-related terms like *asylum, asylum seeker, asylum applicant, refugee, migrant, toleration, irregular migrant* and *illegal migrant*; process-related terms like *migrate, move, immigrate, travel, cross, enter, flee, apply, arrive, leave* and *come*; and terms related to controlling that process, like *border control, immigration authorities, border checks, border police* and *border closure*.

Migration is associated most strongly with *irregularity, illegality, limiting, bordering,* the *federal office for migration and refugees, stemming, fighting against, stopping, reducing* and *ending* (see Fig. 5). Clearly, the semantic field around migration is narrowly focused on *limiting, reducing* and *stopping irregular migration*, which is used interchangeably with *illegal migration*.
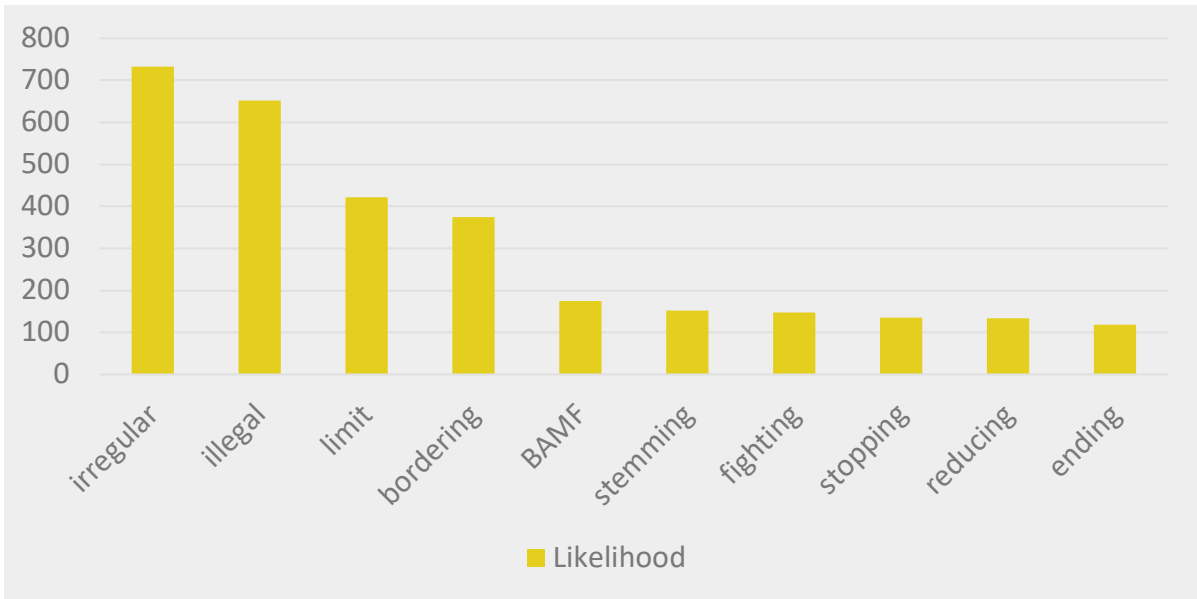
*Figure 5: Collocations of migration by statistical likelihood (media corpus)*

In contrast to the abstract notion of migration, references to *migrants* are most strongly with illegality quantifiers like *influx*, *more* and *many*, *arrival*, crossing *borders*, crossing the *Mediterranean* and *English Channel* by *boat*, and authorities of migration control.
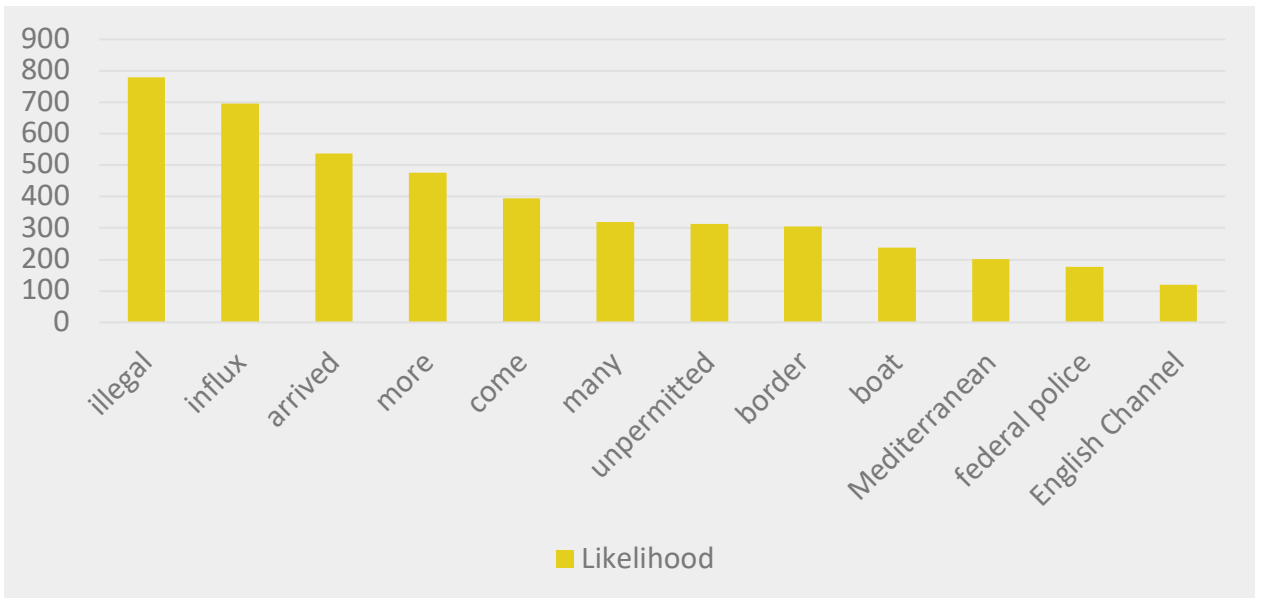


*Figure 6: Collocations of migrant by statistical likelihood (media corpus)*

The most striking difference to migration might be the virtual absence of *irregular* from its collocations: While German media do regularly refer to *irregular migration* (as well as *illegal migration*), they almost universally write about *illegal* rather than *irregular migrants* (see Fig. 6). The representation of refugees, in comparison, differs significantly, associating them mainly with the *Geneva Convention, Ukraine, costing money,* specific German politicians, *human rights* and *numbers*.

Similar analyses were carried out for all key terms related to irregular migration, confirming a preoccupation with irregular migrants' work, access to the labour market, the need for control and dangers. In these quantitative terms, differences between tabloid and quality media are negligible, limited to a more frequent use of legally accurate terms by the latter; progressive media, however, more consistently refer to *irregularity* over *illegality* than conservative media.

## 2.3. Qualitative analysis

To analyse the narrative dimension, we downsampled the media corpus. First, we developed proto-narratives based on the statistically significant relations between highly salient base words and strongly associated words to fill the narrative elements (1) characters/actors, (2) actions/activities; facultative: (3) settings or circumstances, (4) means, tools and objects engaged with, (5) a moral or evaluation. For the media corpus, *migration, migrant, refugee, work* and *family* were used as base words, generating the following proto-narratives:

| Whole families of | hopeful | **migrants** | arrive | in Germany | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Human traffickers | exploit/ endanger | **migrants** | who desperately | want to get | to Europe |
| | Families of | migrants | seek | a better life | in Germany |
| Especially | male | migrants | work | in precarious jobs | that are badly paid |
| Employers | exploit | migrants | who | should not be | criminalised |
| Many | **migrants** | from specific places (Afghanistan, Syria) | are a burden | when/if they do not work | legally |

| | More and more | **refugees** | are coming | to Germany | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Many | Ukrainian | **refugees** | want | to stay permanently | in Germany |
| Germany | has been taking in | hundreds of thousands | **refugees** | and providing for | them |
| Young | male | **refugees** | are / are causing | problems | |
| | **Refugees** | from certain countries | are becoming criminal / radicalised | and should be | deported |
| | More and more | **refugees** | are coming | to Germany | |

| | Guided/Desirable | **migration** | helps | the German economy | and maintains the wealth of Germans |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Increasing irregular | **migration** | burdens/is a burden on | the budget | |
| | **Migration** | from other cultures | divides/threatens | society | |
| Germany | is being challenged by | **migration** | and seeks | answers | |
| Crises | Increase/intensify | **migration** | thereby threatening | Europe/stability | |

| Migrants | seek/find | **work** | only in specific sectors | because they are underqualified | and because they are vulnerable |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Regular | **work** | supports/facilitates/is necessary for | the integration | of migrants |
| | Legal access to | **work/the labour market** | is important for | migrants | |
| Fair payment/work conditions | to be guaranteed for | **labour of migrants** | is a demand | of politics | |
| Many | migrants | **work** | in bad (badly paid/bad conditions) jobs | without security | |

| Large | **families** | of refugees | are coming | to Germany | because of family reunions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The **family** life | of migrants | in Germany | is | difficult | |
| Migrants | withdraw | into the **family** | thus avoiding integration | into Germany society | |
| The right to **family** | or **family** reunions | are abused | by migrants | and should be restricted | |
| Migrants | depend on | their **families** | which are characterised | by patriarchal / sexist | power relations and structures |

Second, based on this range of proto-narratives, we selected and analysed a small sample of texts containing versions of these narratives, usually including much more detail. The results indicate that German media

- strongly tend to produce narratives with morals or evaluations rather than without

- use prominent gender markers only in narratives of crime or problematic behaviour ("young men become criminal/create problems") and in narratives of suffering ("women from Ukrainian have lost everything")

- use personalised narratives (by using first names, including personal, relatable qualities) about irregularised migrants in connection with morals and evaluations

- tabloid/quality media use personalised narratives differently, i.e., link to different types of morals and evaluations: individualised emotional appeals in the case of tabloids, geopolitical evaluations and political/policy consequences in the case of quality media

- tend to link narratives about irregular migrants to other narratives, often about German 'heroes' or 'helpers' in the case of tabloids, and to German politics or Germany's role in European/international politics in the case of quality media

To give an illustrative example for the proto-narrative "Young male migrants create problems" from a tabloid, the following quote highlights the moral evaluations in the story's conclusion:

> *[...] Should the police ask for permission to enforce the law?* **Of course, the Senator of the Interior is right.** *The Hamburg judgement is being contested and therefore does not yet apply, and certainly not to Berlin. Mrs Breitenbach has used it preemptively* **to torpedo the work of the police**. *There is no other way to put it. After all,* **it is difficult to get hold of asylum seekers who have to be deported anyway. They usually go into hiding. And now the police are supposed to** *go to the judge beforehand and* **ask for permission to enforce the law?** *(Bild 13/02/2019)*

The highlighted sections show how the primary moral is linked to other narratives and their respective morals: Not only is the Senator right, but Breitenbach's actions constitute sabotage of the police, most asylum seekers evade the state to avoid deportation, and it is unacceptable to ask the police to defer to a judge.

## 3. The discursive construction of irregularity in politics

### 3.1. Data sample

Data was compiled to reflect public political discourse about irregular migration and migrants in terms of Germany's institutions of representative democracy, policy-making and party politics at the federal level. This included parliamentary debates, party manifestos and coalition papers, political speeches and press releases of the Federal Government and MPs of all parties represented in the Bundestag, as well as reports and statements presented to or by parliamentary committees/working groups. A sample of 589 texts from a five-year period (1.1.2019 to 31.12.2023) were included, yielding a total 26,710,079 tokens. The text corpus was not used to quantitatively compare parties or institutions.

### 3.2. Quantitative analysis

The most frequent individual terms related to irregularised migrants, their working and living conditions, in the politics corpus include: *migrant(s)*, *work*, *labour market*, *economy*, *numbers*, *Germany*, *costs*, *budget*, *rights*, *human rights*, *policy/ies*, *Europe/European*, *obligations*, *law*, *measures*, *legal*, *illegal*, *border*, *irregular*, *protect*, *security* and *crime* (Migrant(en), Arbeit, arbeiten, Arbeitsmarkt, Anzahl/Zahl, Deutschland, Kosten, Budget, Rechte, Menschenrechte, Politik, Europa/europäisch, Pflichten, Gesetz, Maßnahmen, legal, illegal, Grenze, irregular, beschützen, Schutz, Sicherheit and Kriminalität). Significantly, we can also observe that political discourse does not generally conflate migrants with asylum seekers, asylum applicants or refugees. However, the term *person in residence-law illegality* (*Menschen in aufenthaltsrechtlicher Illegalität*) is virtually

absent from political discourse. Similarly, terms related to the family and household dimension of irregularised migrants (*Familie, Haushalt, zu Hause*) are infrequent and appear mostly in the context of human rights and welfare.

While the high frequency of *migrant(s)* and their *numbers* is unsurprising, given the topical focus of our text selection, the other highly frequent items on the above list warrant a closer look. German political discourse is strongly focused not just on *work* but the *labour market* (and *labour market access*) and the *economy* in relation to irregularised migrants, as well as on the *costs* of irregular migration and its impact on the *budget*. *Rights* — often but not always specifically *human rights* — are also often discussed, often in relation to purported *duties* or *obligations* of migrants. Rather than politics in general, specific *policies*, *laws* and *measures* are frequently mentioned, many of which relate to *labour*, *bordering* and *crime* in terms of *protecting* or maintaining *security*. The specific governmental institutions and authorities that carry out in such policies, including asylum, general welfare, education and healthcare, are relatively absent from political discourse. Among these, vague references to *the government, federal ministries*, and to *the federal police* are the most frequent.
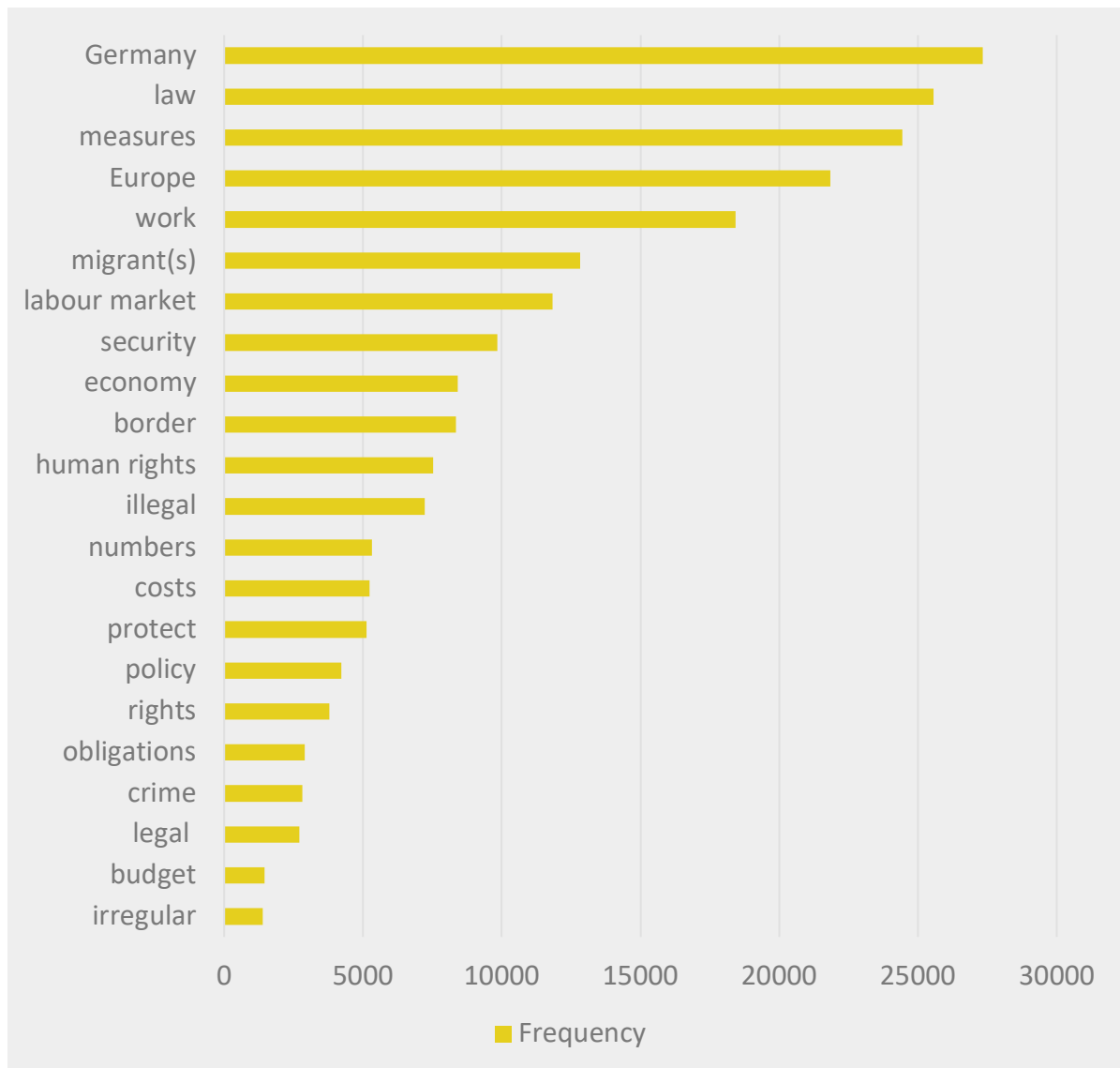
*Figure 7: Salience of individual words by frequency (politics corpus)*

Significantly, legality – in terms of *legal*, *legality* and *illegal*, *illegality* – is much more frequently referenced than regularity – almost exclusively in terms of the adjective *irregular*. Overall, migration is five times more frequently linked to *Germany* (and *German*) than to *Europe* (and *European*), including the geographical territory, state(s), political entities and institution.

As the lexical frequency of individual words does not reliably indicate which topics are most dominant across a large number of texts, we also analysed large groups of semantically connected words, so-called macro-topics, to comprehensively map the semantic preoccupations in the data.

Across the data from the domain of politics, the following 12 macro-topics dominate political discourse around irregularity – with example words listed from highest to lowest frequency. Please note that the macro-topics are the same as in the media, their prevalence and the words comprising them are different:

1. **POLITICS and GOVERNANCE**, including subgroups:
   a. THE GOVERNMENT and its democratic institutions, e.g. we (the government), the government, the coalition, politics, SPD, FDP, CDU/CSU, Greens, German federal states, communes, federal ministry, federal minister, Chancellor, parliament, debate
   b. POLICY, e.g., policies, measures, control, limit, change, safeguard, protect, residence act, asylum act, immigration act, regulations, develop, respond, amend, integration course act, freedom of movement act, employment of foreigners act, asylum seekers' benefits act, family reunification law
   c. INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS, e.g., European politics, EU, member states, European Commission, European Parliament, Council of Europe, EU Agency for Asylum, Frontex, Europol, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
   d. NGOs and INGOs, e.g., NGO, Pro Asyl, Caritas, Amnesty International, Diakonie, Red Cross, Sea-Watch, Refugee Councils, IOM, Dignity, Doctors without Borders, Human Rights Watch
   e. LAW AND ORDER, e.g., federal police, protect, courts, sentence, punishment, safeguard, stop, police, law, prevent, order, police officers, regulations, arrest, detain, observe, processing, deport, deportation, justice
2. **WORK and LABOUR**, e.g., work, labour market, employer, work place, economy, employed, salary, exploit, exploited, exploitation, underpaid, agriculture, work conditions, unemployment
3. **MIGRATION**, e.g., migration, migrant, status, applicant, asylum, asylum seeker, refugee, residency, illegal, tolerated, toleration, flight, arrival, irregular, arrivals, border crossing, border control, border checks, immigration, immigration authorities, streams, waves
4. **STATUS**, e.g., residency title, status, illegal, legal, asylum, refugee, irregular, toleration, tolerated, integration, integrate, integrated, adapt, customs, behaviour, documents, requirements
5. **WELFARE**, e.g., welfare, welfare costs, welfare budget, healthcare, welfare state, education, childcare, emergency care, support, care, welfare policy, housing, homelessness
6. **COSTS and BURDENS**, e.g., costs, money, billions, millions, threaten, budget, budgeting, burden, to burden, growing, to cost, increased, debt, pay, weigh down, reduce

7. **NUMBERS and STATISTICS**, e.g., numbers, million, thousands, percent, dozens, hundreds, groups, masses, wave, stream, flood, influx, increasing, growing, mounting, peak, overwhelming, record

8. **RIGHTS and OBLIGATIONS**, e.g., human rights, basic rights, rights, freedom of movement, limiting, guaranteeing, safeguarding, requirement, dignity, right to family, children's rights

9. **CRIME**, e.g., criminality, crimes, theft, criminal, steal, attack, perpetrator, sex offender, vandalise, sexual assault, rape, violence, robbery, illegal, squatting, victim

10. **PLACES and GEOGRAPHY**, e.g., Germany, borders, Berlin, cities, Europe, Ukraine, Lampedusa, Greece, Italy, Switzerland, Belarus, Austria, Syria, Turkey, countryside, Cologne, Mediterranean, sea, English Channel, boats

11. **CRISIS**, e.g., crisis, crises, times of crisis, Covid-19, climate crisis, pandemic, migration crisis, energy crisis, financial crisis, refugee crisis, war, Ukraine, economic crisis, fighting, civil war, unrest, Russia, terror, terrorism, catastrophe, collapse, threat

12. **SUBJECT** (individuals and groups), including subgroups

    a. FAMILY and HOUSEHOLD, e.g., families, parents, mother, father, children, relatives, marry, marriage, divorce

    b. SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE, e.g., live, life, wait, hope, move, search

    c. IDENTITIES (including gender, age, ethnicity, religion), e.g., man, woman, child, young, single, married, religion, religious, devout, Muslim, Islam, Mosque, Christian, Christianity, radical, Imam, Church, churches, beliefs

Notably, nearly a third of the lexical material included here refers to the POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE around migration. If we compare the relative weight given to the sub-topics within POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE, we see that the German state, its government and democratic institutions (38 %), together with policy (30 %), make up more than two thirds of the references (68 %), followed by international institutions (15 %) and law and order (10 %). NGOS and INGOs are comparatively minor aspect of media reporting (6 %). It is also striking that the macro-topic SUBJECT, especially its sub-groups related to the FAMILY or HOUSEHOLD dimension and to the SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE of irregularised migrants (with 12% and 8%, respectively, compared to 80% for IDENTITIES), have very low prevalence in political discourse.

Interestingly, the LABOUR AND WORK is the second-most prevalent topic, with a strong focus on *labour markets*, *employers*, *the economy*, *exploitation* and *illegality* rather than on migrants in such situations. This indicates a general trend for political discourse across all macro-topics: lexically, these are discussed in abstract (technocratic) register comprising nouns rather than verbs. This is especially noticeable for MIGRATION, STATUS and WELFARE (*migration* over *migrate*, *flight* over *flee*, *border crossing* over *crossing borders*), states rather than processes or actions (*resident* over *reside*, *integration* over *integrate*), favouring complex compound nouns rather than narrative structures.
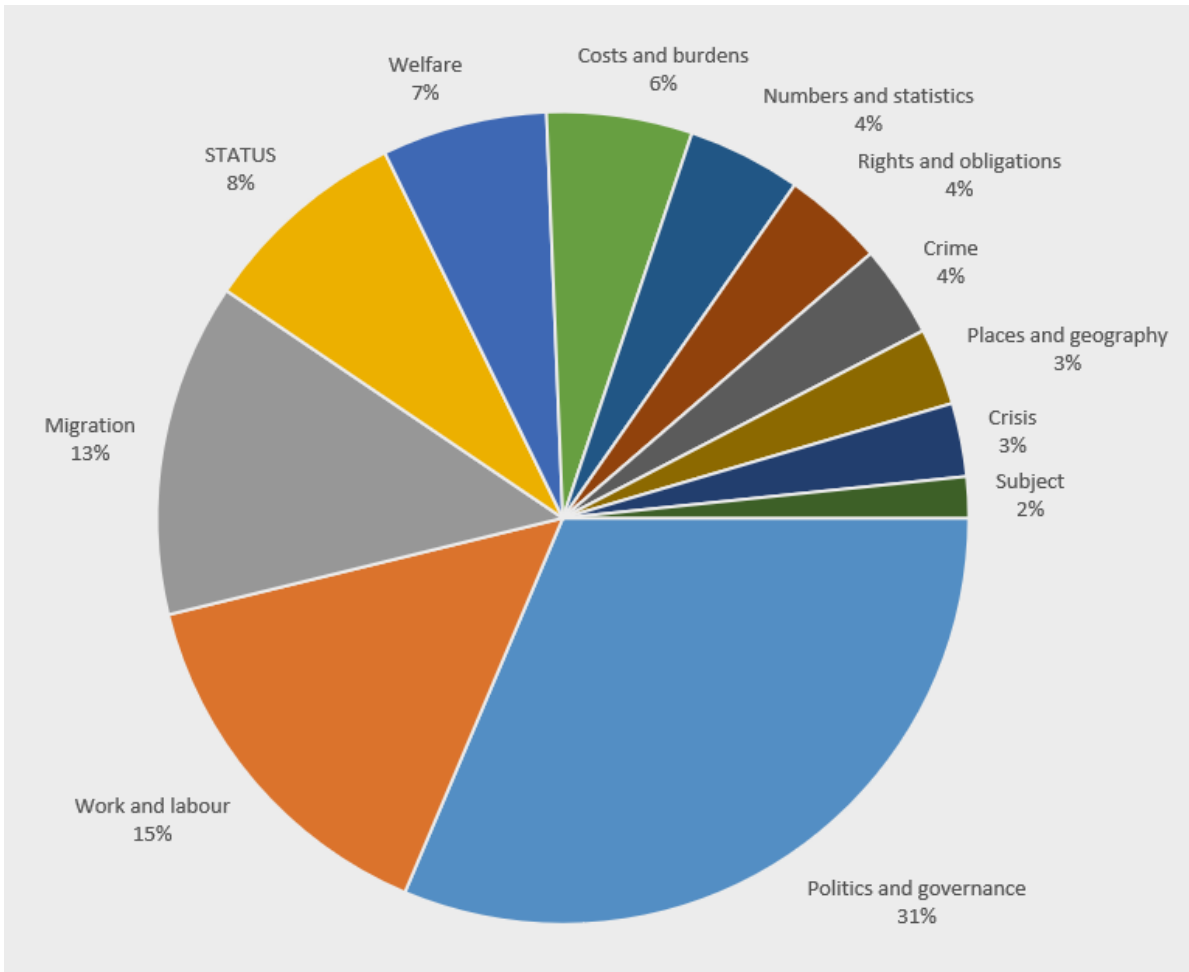
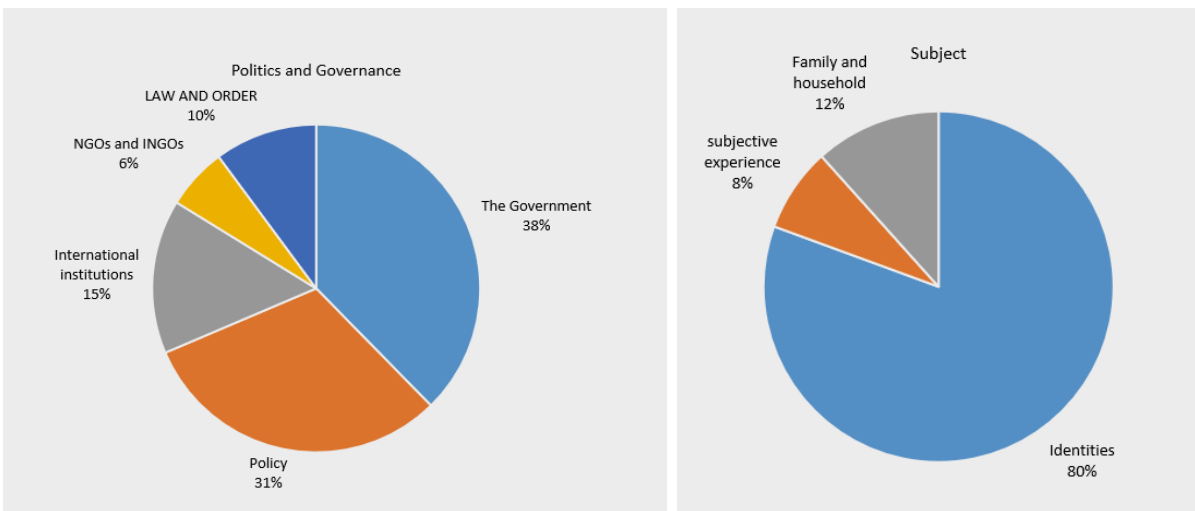Figure 8: Salience of macro-topics (politics corpus)



Figure 9: Relative weight of sub-topics in Politics and Governance and Subject

Taken together, references to the lived experience of migrants beyond various administrative systems (their status, integration, labour market, welfare) make up less than 2 % of the lexical material across the macro-topics.

Given its overall prevalence, the lexical composition of WORK and LABOUR in relation to migration warrants a closer look. The most salient lexical items in this macro-topic reference mainly three aspects: *labour markets* and *access* to them; *employers, businesses* and *the economy*; working places and conditions, including *exploitation* and the *illegality* or *irregularity of work*; and *government institutions* related to combat irregular work and exploitation.

The people who are affected by exploitation are virtually absent from this topic, which is typically discussed in abstract and/or statistical terms.

In the context irregularity, the terms denoting *work, working* and *workers* collocate strongly with words relating to *migration* (e.g. migrant workers), *qualification* (skilled labour, skilled workers), *legality* and *illegality*, *rights, exploitation* and *dangers* (human trafficking, forced labour, forced prostitution) as well as specific *sectors* (care, meat and agriculture). The experience of people affected by such working conditions, e.g., their motivations, needs and experiences, is absent from the discourse.
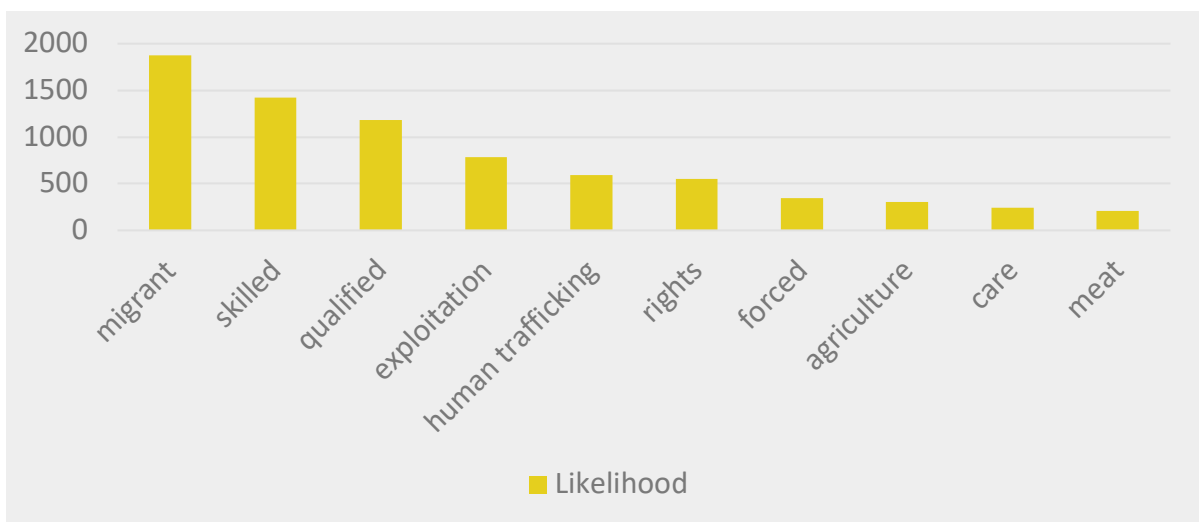


*Figure 10: Collocations of work in the context of irregularity, by statistical likelihood (politics corpus)*

MIGRATION constitutes the third-most prevalent macro-topic, comprising mainly abstract notions like *migration, movement, arrival, immigration, irregularity, legality* and *residency,* terms related to controlling migration, like *border control, immigration authorities, border checks, border police* and *border closure,* and status-related terms like *asylum, asylum seeker, asylum applicant, refugee, migrant, toleration, irregular migrant* and *illegal migrant.* Process-related terms like *move, immigrate, come, travel, cross, enter, flee, apply, arrive* and *leave* are marginal. Thus, the composition of this macro-topic follows the general pattern of technocratic register.

In politics, the word *migration* itself is associated most strongly with *refugees, irregularity, federal authority, integration, flight, illegality, BAMF,* a*sylum, regularity, steer, limiting, European, stemming, border management, directing, stopping* and *reducing* (see Fig. 11). We note that the strong association with refugees results from the frequent use of Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, which, despite being a proper name, is still relevant to such discursive patterns.

In summary, the semantic field around migration is focused first on various forms of integrating, controlling, limiting and directing, second on illegality (before irregularity), and finally on European aspects of migration.
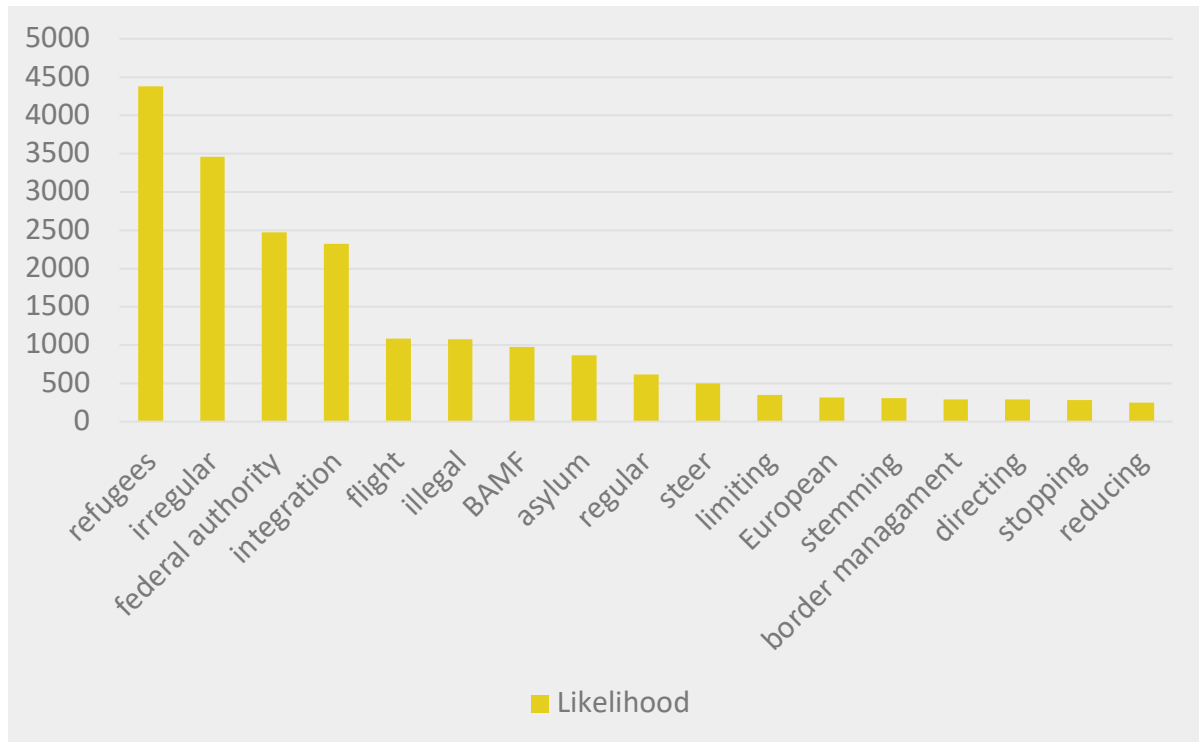


*Figure 11: Collocations of migration by statistical likelihood (politics corpus)*

In contrast to the abstract concept of migration, references to *migrants* are most strongly with *refugees, illegality, irregularity, people smuggling, numbers, Libya, taking in, asylum seekers, instrumentalisation, Europe, labour, Belarus, integration, the English Channel, borders, holding facilities, deportation, Greece* and *prison camps* (see Fig. 12). It is significant that labour figures more prominently here than with the noun migration, indicating the migration as a whole is more often seen as separate from labour than migrants themselves. While the compound labour migration is more common (n=116) than the compound labour migrant (n=28), this does not equalise the before-noted prevalence of the association between migrant and labour.

It should be noted that in the case of migrant, the association with refugee is not due to an organisation's name but stems from consistent co-mentioning of the two groups. A further difference is that migrants are more closely associated with illegal/illegality than migration; similarly, terms of control – including camps and prisons – only associate with migrants. Among all collocations, the word instrumentalization stands out – it appears in contexts where progressive politicians criticize others from using migrants for political gain.
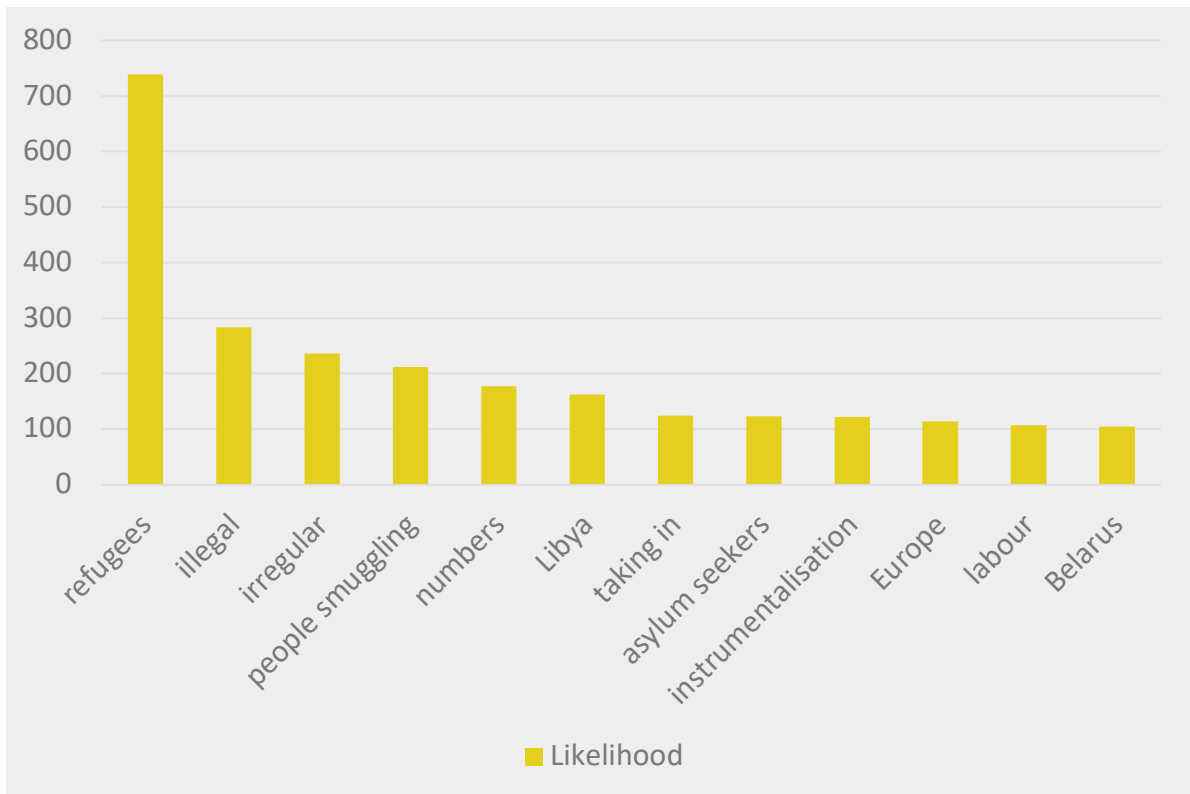
*Figure 12: Collocations of migrant by statistical likelihood (politics corpus)*

Analysis for other key terms related to irregular migration show political discourse to be preoccupied with irregular migrants' status (frequently using the term alongside *refugee* without distinction), with their integration, their access to the labour market, the threats and burdens they represent, and the need for control. The association with crime, on the other hand, is weak. We also note that the term migrant is gendered as male (and young) in the context of crime. The oft-assumed association between the status of migrants and crime is thus not present in our evidence.

### 3.3. Qualitative analysis

The downsampling the politics corpus, we identified narrative structures around *migration, migrants, refugees, persons, work* and *family*, generating the following proto-narratives:

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Unrestricted | **migration** | threatens | social peace | | |
| Germany | cannot cope with | growing | **migration** | from certain countries / cultures | |
| Germany | has always been | a country | of **immigration** | and economically | depends on it |
| Irregular | **migration** | must | be addressed / solved | at the EU level | |
| Crises / climate change / war | intensifies / increases / causes | **migration** | on the international / global level | especially | from the global south |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Many | irregular | **migrants** | are living in | Germany | underground |
| A growing number of | illegal | **migrants** | are coming to/are already in | Germany | |
| The arrival | of larger and larger numbers of | **migrants** | are a burden on | the budget | and the taxpayer |
| Young, male | and Muslim | **migrants** | are threatening | Germany / German society / social stability | by refusing to integrate |
| Germany | needs | to find a way | to integrate | **migrants** | for economic / demographic reasons |

| Many | Ukrainian | refugees | want to | permanently stay | in Germany |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Germany / We | has / have taken in | refugees | from many different countries | and provide for them | |
| Growing numbers / flood of | refugees | are overwhelming | Germany | and need to be | stopped / reduced |
| Young, male | and Muslim | refugees | are a problem | for Germany | |
| Criminal | refugees | have to be | deported | into third countries | as fast as possible |

| Many | persons | in residence illegality | need support | and have | rights / human rights |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The police / authorities | have problems with | persons | in residency illegality | such illegals | must be found as quickly as possible |
| A growing number | of persons | in residence illegality | is / is becoming | criminal | |
| Many | especially young men without an education or job | persons | in residence illegality | are being exploited | are vulnerable |
| Germany | has a responsibility | a moral duty | to persons | in residence illegality | and must therefore protect their rights |

| The government | has neglected / failed to | protect | the work places / jobs | of German citizens | that are being stolen by migrants |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Without sufficient support | irregular migrants | depend on | work | in which they are exploited by | unscrupulous business owners in agriculture / in delivery jobs |
| Irregular migrants | do work | in bad conditions | that no one else | would do | |
| Irregular / undeclared | work | leads | irregular migrants | into dependency | so we need to address their vulnerability |

| Migrants | overcome | difficulties / challenges | with the help of their families | which provide | stability and support |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Problems with integration | begin in / have to be tackled in | families | because that is where | values are conveyed | and radicalisation can be stopped |
| Irregular migrants | have a right to family | so we have to | protect their right | it is our duty | as German state |
| It is not families | but young men | who are coming | to Germany | | |

Based on this range of proto-narratives, we selected and analysed a small sample of texts containing fully fleshed-out versions of these basic structures. The results indicate that German politics

- strongly tend to use impersonal, abstract rather than personalised narratives (by using first names, including personal, relatable qualities)

- strongly tend to link narratives about irregular migrants and migrations to other narratives, often more than one (up to as many as five in our small sample)

- tend to combine gender with religious markers ("young Muslim men")

- produce narratives with morals or evaluations approximately as frequently as without them

- use prominent gender markers only in narratives of crime or problematic behaviour ("young men become criminal/create problems") and in narratives of suffering ("women from Ukrainian have lost everything")

To give an illustrative example of these tendencies, we quote from a parliamentary debate in which a MP combines versions of several proto-narratives "Germany is an immigration country" (negated), "Migrants abuse the system and lie", "Migrants are a burden", "Migrants refuse not integrate", "Migrants steal jobs", "Migrants are unqualified" and "Migrants are culturally alien" – in addition to a general crisis narrative about digitalization.

> […] *Germany is not a country of immigration. Germany is a homeland. Millions are completely unemployed. 2.5 million people between the ages of 20 and 34 have no vocational qualification. Many hundreds of thousands of jobs will be lost in the next few years due to digitalisation […]. In contrast, you have brought 2.5 million* **so-called refugees** *into the country since 2014, 1 million Ukrainians last year alone and 135,000 people from all over the world this year alone. We don't have the problem that we have too few people in our country, we have the problem that we have far too many people in our country*

*who **have not been socialised, who don't qualify and who don't integrate**, except into our social system. But you open the **flood gates**. With your policy, you are primarily attracting **soldiers of fortune** who already have no prospects or are mercilessly underqualified in their home country. Explain to me: how is a Palestinian **scrap car mechanic** supposed to repair electric cars in our country? Should a **nomadic goatherd** from the steppe be successful in our livestock farming?*

The highlighted sections in this very dense excerpt indicate how the primary claim ("Germany is not a country of immigration") is linked to other narratives and their respective morals ("problem", "problem" and "flood"), ending in a rhetorical/loaded question that plays on the narrative of cultural inferiority of migrants.

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

### 4.1. Data sample

Data was compiled to reflect civil society organisations' public discourse about irregular migration and migrants. This included webpage texts, leaflets, flyers, interviews, reports and brochures by NGOs and trade unions that regularly speak about related issues. We also collected data from prominent 'uncivil society' actors, such as the Identitarian Movement, in an effort to comprehensively map representations of irregular migrants in the public sphere. In terms of sampling size, texts by such 'uncivil' actors account for roughly a tenth of the data from civil society. In total, 872 texts from a five-year period (1.1.2019 to 31.12.2023) were included, yielding 2,551,014 tokens. A comparison between civil and uncivil discourse was carried out as well, but is not reported in detail here.

### 4.2. Quantitative analysis

The most frequent individual terms related to irregularised migrants, their working and living conditions, in the civil society corpus include: *migrant(s), together, integration, live, persons*, migration, *people, responsibility, women, families, men, children, work,* life, *rights, health, education, Germany, society, human rights, well-being, communities, Christian, refugees, millions, police, European, political, flight* and *racism*. We note that civil society discourse does not conflate migrants with asylum seekers, asylum applicants or refugees, but it also rarely uses the technocratic term *person in residence-law illegality* (*Menschen in aufenthaltsrechtlicher Illegalität*).
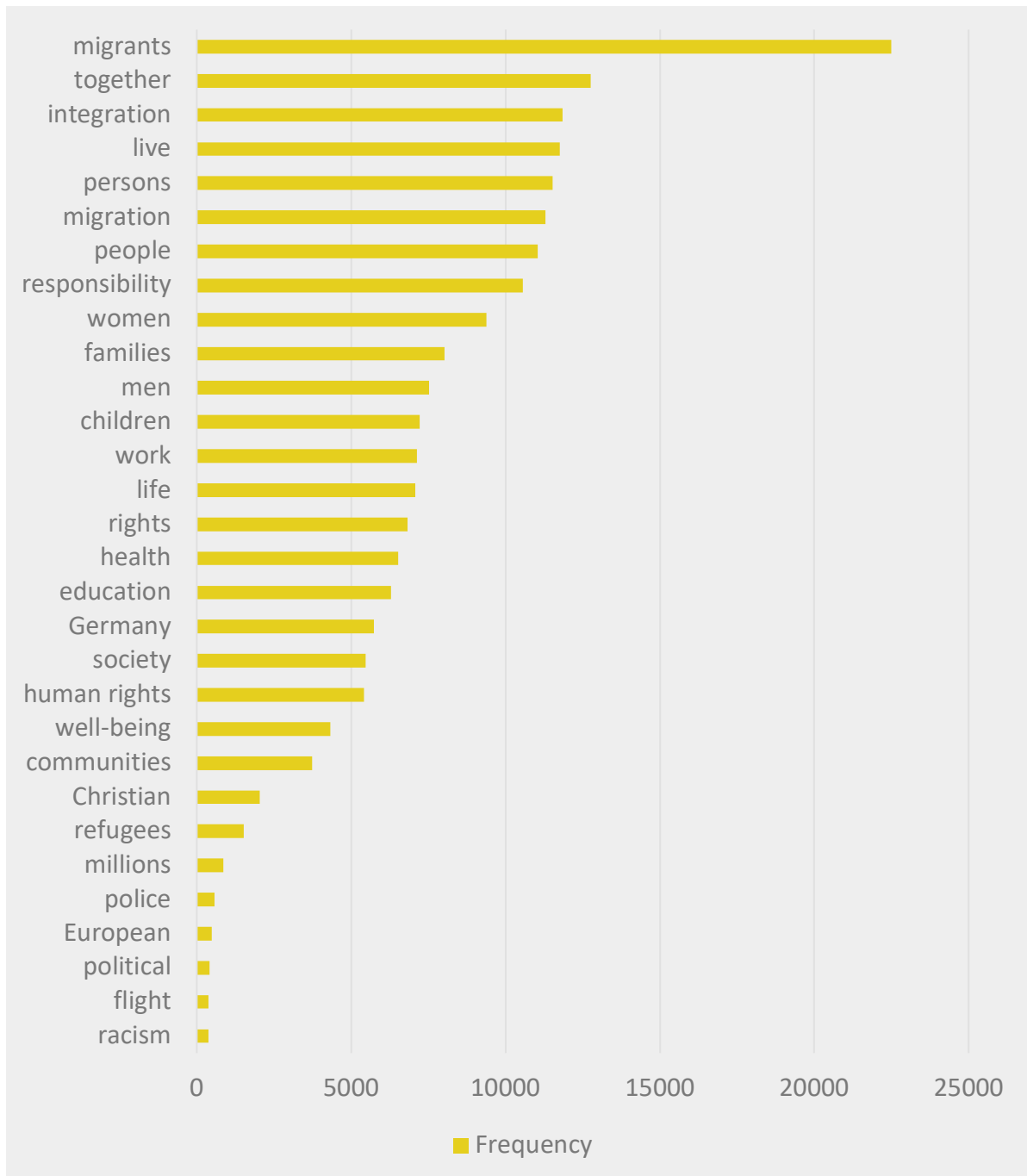
*Figure 13: Salience of individual words by frequency (civil society corpus)*

While the high frequency of *migrant(s)* and *human rights* is unsurprising, given the topical focus of our text selection among NGOs, some other highly frequent items on the above list warrant a closer look. The most common references beside migrant are not determined by their status but by their humanity: *person*, people, *women*, *men* and *children*. Alongside such salient topics as *welfare* and *human rights*, the civil society corpus also features notions such as *together, live, integration* and *society*. In terms of high-frequency lexis, then, the civil society corpus constructs the social reality of irregular migrants not in terms of governance, policy and institutions of control but in terms of *life, living, well-being* and *family*.

Discourses about irregularised migrants in Germany

Despite the hardships faced by irregular migrants, there is very little negativity (in lexical terms) in this discourse: *racism*, *discrimination* and *exclusion* have a relatively low frequency. Given that all the NGOs have a national focus, it is perhaps not surprising that *Germany* and German *society* are much more salient than *Europe*, the *EU* or *international* aspects in general.

As with the other corpora, we analysed this data set for its macro-topics, i.e., large groups of semantically connected words, to comprehensively map the semantic preoccupations in the discourse. Across the data, the following 12 macro-topics dominate civil society discourse around irregular migrants – with example words listed from highest to lowest frequency. Please note that the categories used are the same as in the other corpora, their prevalence and the words comprising them are different:

1. **SUBJECT** (individuals and groups), including subgroups

   a. FAMILY and HOUSEHOLD, e.g., families, children, parents, mother, father, relatives, marry, house, at home, marriage, divorce, move, rent, decorate, furniture, livelihood, provide, start a family, live together

   b. SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE, e.g., life, live, try, struggle, wait, hope, search, watch TV, play football, play games, learn, study, cook, play games, have a hobby, feel, say/speak, ask a question, pray, experience, arrive, leave

   c. IDENTITIES (including gender, age, ethnicity, religion), e.g., persons, people, women, men, children, young, single, married, Muslim, Christian, Church, churches, beliefs, Islam, sexual orientation

2. **MIGRATION**, e.g., migrants, migration, refugee, irregular, asylum applicant, asylum, asylum seeker, residency, tolerated, immigration, immigration authorities, toleration, flight, arrival, border, come, border crossing, illegal

3. **RIGHTS and OBLIGATIONS**, e.g., human rights, basic rights, rights, freedom of movement, protect, guaranteeing, safeguarding, requirement, dignity, right to family, children's rights, right to health, right to education

4. **WORK and LABOUR**, e.g., work, workers, employees, labour market, employer, companies, work places, labour rights, employed, exploit, exploited, exploitation, salary, underpaid, vulnerable, agriculture, delivery, care, work conditions, unemployment, safety

5. **WELFARE**, e.g., welfare, healthcare, health, education, childcare, emergency medical care, housing, homelessness, support, basic care

6. **STATUS**, e.g., residency title, status, legal, asylum, refugee, irregular, toleration, tolerated, integration, documents, requirements

7. **POLITICS and GOVERNANCE**, including subgroups:

   a. THE GOVERNMENT and its democratic institutions, e.g., the government, politics, German federal states, communes, cities, federal ministry, federal minister

   b. POLICY, e.g., policies, measures, regulations, residence act, asylum act, immigration act, amend, integration course act, freedom of movement act, employment of foreigners act, asylum seekers' benefits act, family reunification law

c. INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS, e.g., European politics, EU, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, European Commission, European Parliament, Council of Europe,

d. NGOs and INGOs, e.g., NGO, Pro Asyl, Caritas, Jesuiten Flüchtlingsdienst, Diakonie, Forum (Leben in der) Illegalität, Arbeit und Leben, Malteser, Medizin für Menschen, DaMigra, Mediendienst Integration, Rotes Kreuz, Flüchtlingsrat, Respect, Legaisierung Jetzt, Gewerkschaft, Doctors of the World, Fair Mobility, Beratungszentrum, BEMA, Stadmission, Clearingstelle, Amnesty International, Solidarity City, Doctors without Borders, Human Rights Watch

e. LAW AND ORDER, e.g., police, Basic Law, legal, law, protect, courts, regulations, arrest, detain, fair, justice, just

8. **CRISIS**, e.g., crisis, crises, times of crisis, Covid-19, civil war, climate crisis, pandemic, war, Ukraine, unrest, Russia, terror, famine, drought, oppression, revolution, persecution, ethnic cleansing, fighting, armed conflict

9. **CRIME**, e.g., accusations, crimes, allegations, hate speech, discrimination, perpetrator, attacked, injured, victims

10. **PLACES and GEOGRAPHY**, e.g., Germany, borders, Berlin, cities, Syria, Greece, Africa, Italy, Belarus, Ukraine, Austria, Turkey, Afghanistan, Sudan, countryside, Russia, Cologne, Europe, Mediterranean, sea, boats

11. **COSTS and BURDENS**, e.g., pay, costs, money, budget

12. **NUMBERS and STATISTICS**, e.g., many, dozens, numbers, millions, thousands, percent, hundreds, groups, increasing, growing, few

Notably, more than a quarter of the lexical material falls into the category SUBJECT, particularly the subgroups SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE and FAMILY/HOUSEHOLD. The semantic groups MIGRATION (18 %) and RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS (15 %) are also notably strong in the civil society corpus. In contrast, POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE make up no more than 4 % of the references, with its subgroups focused more on NGOs than POLICY and THE GOVERNMENT. Very low salience is given to the categories CRIME, PLACES AND GEOGRAPHY as well as NUMBERS AND STATISTICS (2 % each).
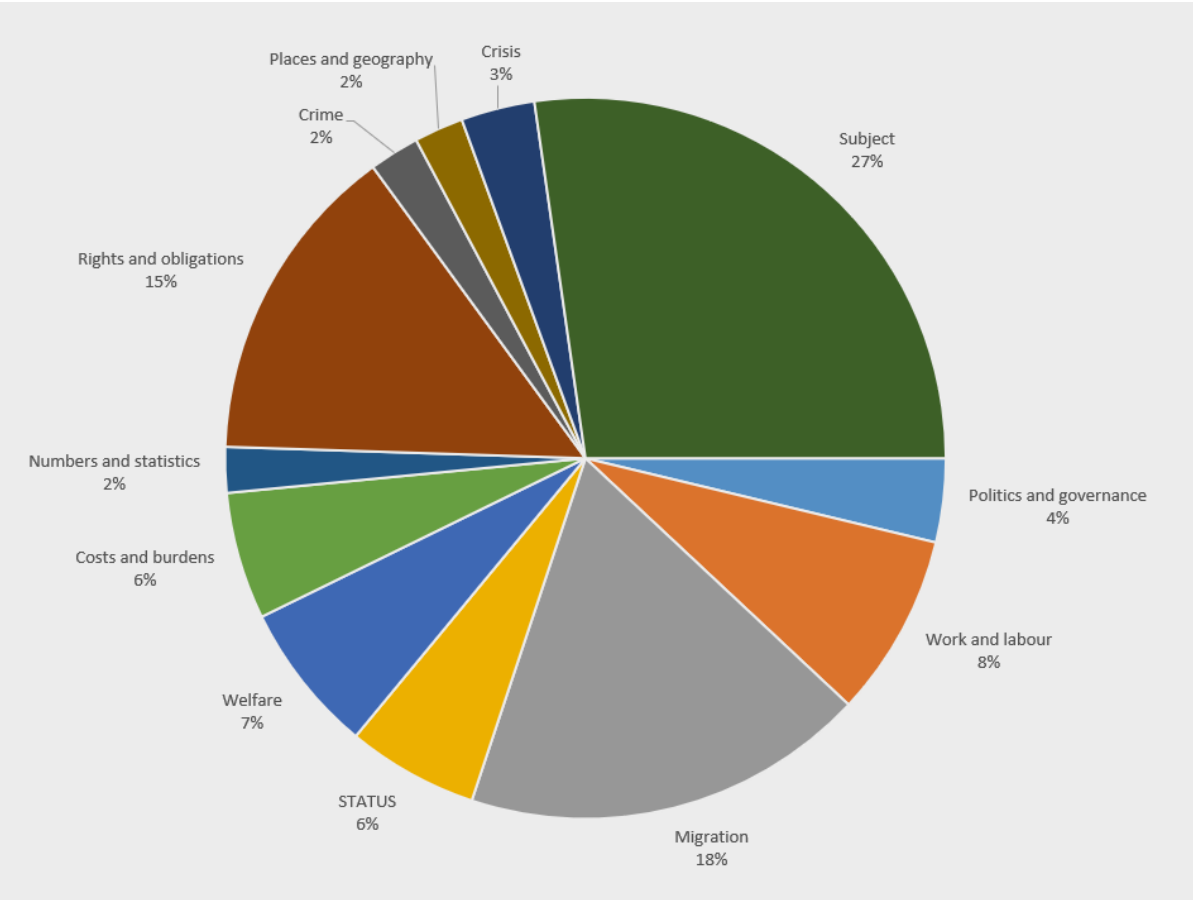
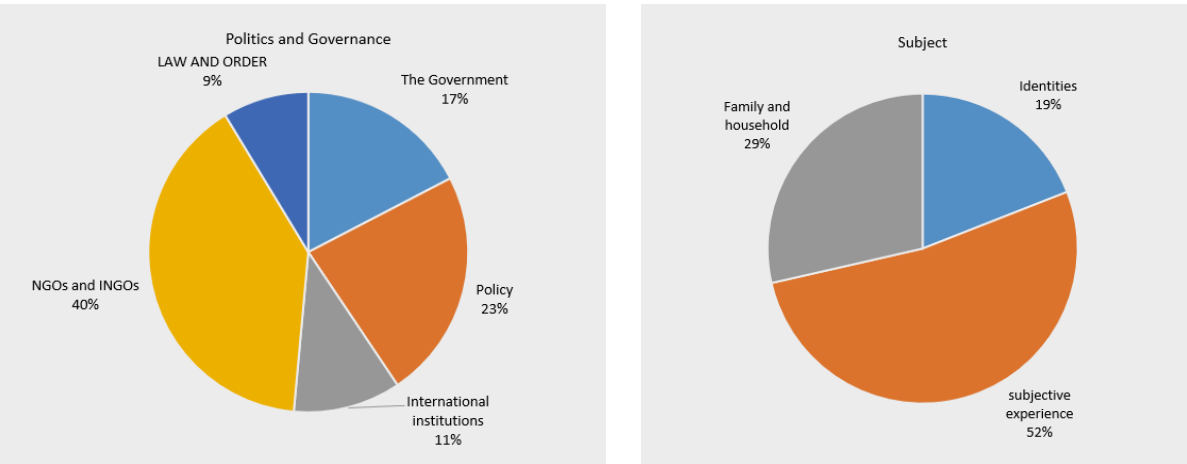*Figure 14: Salience of macro-topics (civil society corpus)*



*Figure 15: Relative weight of sub-topics in Politics and Governance and Subject (civil society corpus)*

Given its overall prevalence, the lexical composition of Subject warrants a closer look. We find a wide range of verbs and, to a lesser extent, nouns denoting everyday life for irregular migrants. Many of these relate to the FAMILY AND HOUSEHOLD dimension and SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE: some of these appear mundane, like furniture, home or rent, but in context they refer to the very real struggles of irregularised people.

Within the subgroup IDENTITIES, we note that simple (underdetermined) terms like person or people are highly frequent compared to religious and other determinants. Such determinants, much more often used in media and politics, would serve to highlight difference and otherness.

In civil society discourse, the terms denoting *work* and *workers* collocate strongly with words relating to *rights*, *exploitation* and *dangers* as well as specific *sectors* (care, delivery and agriculture).

This emphasises the experiences of vulnerability and vulnerable situation of people rather than the needs of labour markets, employers or the economy.
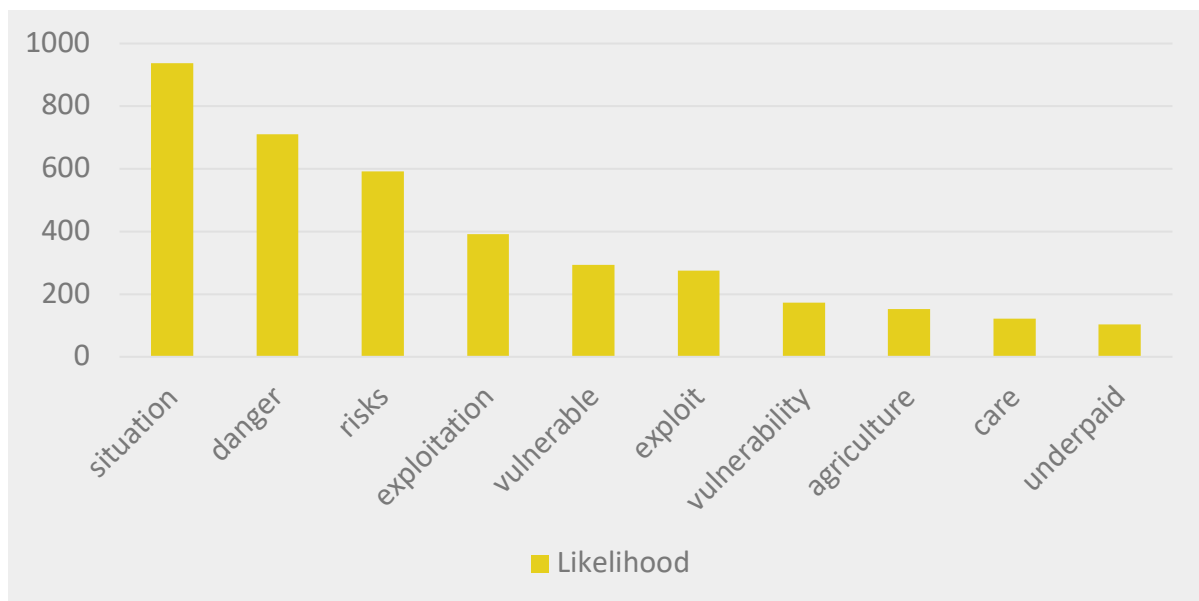


*Figure 16: Collocations of work in the context of irregularity, by statistical likelihood (civil society corpus)*

MIGRATION constitutes the most prevalent macro-topic, comprising mainly process-related terms like *move, immigrate, come, travel, cross, enter, flee, apply, arrive* and *leave*. Status-related terms like *asylum, asylum seeker, asylum applicant, refugee, migrant, toleration, irregular migrant* and are less common. Apart from *migration*, abstract notions like *arrival, immigration, irregularity, legality* and *residency* are rare, while terms related to controlling migration, like *border control, immigration authorities, border checks, border police* are marginal in civil society discourse. Thus, the composition of this macro-topic corresponds to the patterns of narrative-focused and life world-based register.

The word *migration* is associated most strongly with *integration, central (topic), refugees, asylum, crisis, climate, safe, integrate, flight, irregular, war, regularisation, manifold* and *forced* (see Fig. 11). We note that the strong association with *crisis* (and crisis-related terms like *climate* or *war*) indicates an interest with both the causes of displacement and with the lived experiences of migrants.
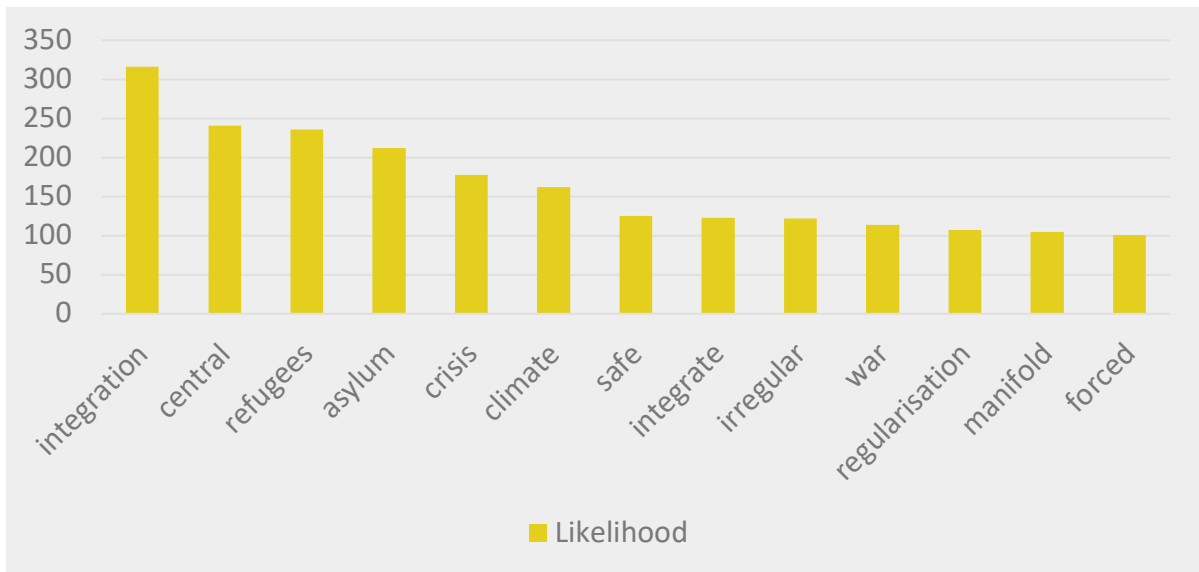
*Figure 17: Collocations of migration by statistical likelihood (civil society corpus)*

In contrast to the abstract concept of migration, references to *migrants* are most strongly with *countries of origin, irregular, rights, seeking, protection, work, labour, human rights, dignity, need, come, provide, families, life, illegality, reality, flight, humane* and *community* (see Fig. 18). It is highly significant that terms like labour, human rights and family figure more prominently here than with the noun *migration*, indicating that migrants rather than migration are connected to these aspects of experience. While the compound *labour migration* is more common (n=156) than the compound labour migrant (n=92), this does not equalise the before-noted prevalence of the association between migrant and labour.
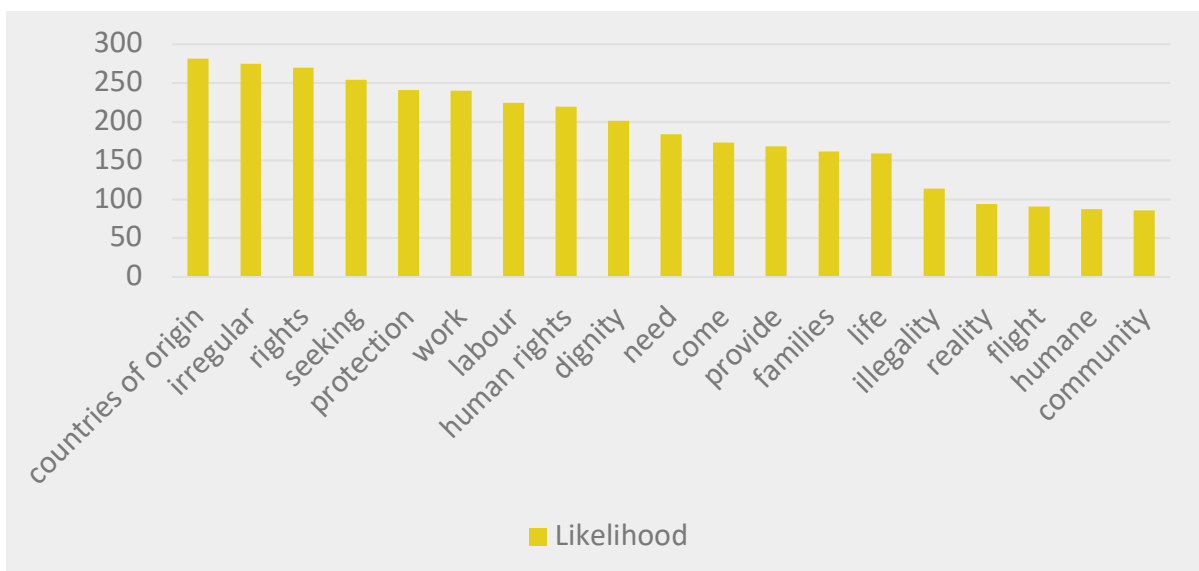


*Figure 18: Collocations of migrant by statistical likelihood (civil society corpus)*

Analysis for other key terms related to irregular migration confirm that civil society discourse is focused on irregularised migrants' experiences in life, their needs and rights. Civil society organisations discuss these predominantly in active, process- and agency-related terms, giving most space to material and emotional process-verbs (e.g., arrive, feel) and very little to verbal process-verbs (e.g., say, argue). Crime is typically discussed as allegedly committed by migrants or as crime against them. We also note that migrants are gendered slightly more female than male.

## 4.3. Qualitative analysis

The downsampling the civil society corpus, we identified narrative structures around *people, migrants, refugees, families, women, irregularity*, generating the following proto-narratives:

| People | do not stop being people | when they | (are forced to) | leave | their homes / countries |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| People | who come to | Germany | without residency status | or lose it | often do not know about this |
| Germany | has to | ensure that | people | can enjoy the rights | that it has legally committed to protecting |
| For many | especially young / desperate | people | from the global south | there is no alternative | to migration |
| Countries like Germany | are morally / ethically obligated | are able to | help | people | in need |
| People | who come to Germany | are able to | contribute / give back | a lot | to Germany |

| Irregular | **migrants** | need | support | in terms of | legal advice, financially, language etc. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Irregular | migrants | want | nothing more than a new beginning | to build a new life | but that is being made impossible |
| We | are helping / supporting / caring for | migrants | with or without residency status | in their everyday struggles | |
| Germany | benefits / profits from | and always has | from migrants | economically and socially | but does not know how to appreciate that |

| Within | **migrant families** | everyday life | happens | even in long-lasting situations of crisis | of the kind irregularity brings with it |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The **family** | is an important point of contact | especially | for migrants | in irregularity | in vulnerable situations |
| Unfortunately | in some **migrant families** | there is | inequality / domestic violence and oppression | as women are oppressed | as their vulnerability and dependency is increased by irregularity |

| Germany | has to do more | to recognize / support | **migrant families** | to help integration | to avoid problems |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | |

| Women | suffer especially / double and threefold | in irregularity | from social exclusion | invisibility | sexism and patriarchy |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The integration | of women | has to be | supported | differently / more | |
| The rights | of women in irregularity | have to be | protected | especially | as they are more vulnerable |
| Women | in irregularity | are | especially prone | to exploitation | in work / sexually |

| Bad living conditions | **in irregularity** | are taking | children's | childhood | away |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Younger / underage children | do not understand | **irregularity** | and the bureaucracy or laws involved | that makes them | especially vulnerable |
| The rights of | children | **in irregularity** | are not being protected | as the conditions of irregularity | intrinsically violate children's rights |

Based on this range of proto-narratives, we analysed a small sample of texts containing fully fleshed-out narratives. The results indicate that German civil society organisations

- use both personalised and impersonal narratives (using first names, including personal, relatable qualities or aggregated identifiers like 'irregular migrants')

- tend not to link narratives about irregular migrants and migration to other narratives

- when they do, they link such narratives to only one or two other narratives

- such linked narratives tend to be about Germany in general, German politics, German society or businesses

- when they do not avoid specific identity markers, they tend to use narratives focused on women, families and children more than men

- tend to address vulnerability also in intersectional terms

- tend to produce narratives with strong morals or evaluations

- when they use terms like migrant or refugee, they do not use them in combination or interchangeably

To give an illustrative example of these tendencies, we quote from an NGO's webpage:

> *Families belong together!*
>
> *Hundreds of thousands of refugees are not living with their closest relatives because war and severe human rights violations have torn them apart.* **Even in Germany, many of them are unable to be with their families** *because the federal government and legal regulations* **make this extremely difficult or even prevent it altogether.** *[...]*
>
> **Without family, integration is difficult**
>
> *During the long waiting periods, spouses become estranged,* **children spend important years without their father or mother**, *and men worry about the safety of their wives, who remain in war zones or overcrowded refugee camps.* **This strain wears families down—and hinders integration.** *"I maintain my marriage only through phone calls. My wife and I have been separated for eight long years," says a father from Eritrea. (Pro Asyl)*

As the above example shows, NGOs tend to give a voice (by quoting) to migrants. Our analysis also indicates that such quotes usually appear towards the end of texts, perhaps to increase the appeal or provide evidence, while the overall narrative is generalised/aggregated.

## 5. Comparative insights

The quantitative comparison of the three corpora follows the same pattern as before: difference in lexical frequency (relative to corpus size), difference in semantic group weight and composition, and collocations of key terms.

Lexical difference is measured in keyness, i.e., the more characteristic a word is for media in comparison to politics, the higher its keyness value; the more similar the usage of a word is in both media and politics, the lower its keyness value. Between media and politics, key terms in WORK are *exploitation, livelihood* and *delivery*; in MIGRATION *flee, apply, travel, come, move, cross*; in POLITICS *elections, party, politicians*; in RIGHTS *human rights, freedom, assimilate, adapt, integrate, documents*; in CRIME *hurt, steal, attack*; in WELFARE *childcare, school, insurance, hospital, doctor*; in SUBJECT *wait, family, hope, live, eat, feel, laugh, sleep, think* and other experience related words; in PLACES *countryside, Lampedusa*; in CRISIS *Covid-19, climate, war, unrest*.

This shows that the media generally focus more on the actions and experiences of irregular migrants, especially within families.

In contrast, politics is distinguished from media by focusing on: in WORK *employers, the economy, labour market*; in MIGRATION *border, illegal, arrivals, border control, immigration, authorities*; in POLITICS *government, we, coalition, policy, measures, restricting, protecting*; in RIGHTS *obligations, limiting, requirement, dignity, children's rights*; in CRIME *criminality, perpetrator*, sex *offender, sexual assault, rape, violence*; in WELFARE *cost, budget, policy*; in SUBJECT *marriage*; in PLACES *Turkey, Syria, Cologne, English Channel*; in STATUS *toleration, integration, customs, requirements*; in CRISIS *terror, terrorism, threat*.

In summary, political discourse much more preoccupied with policy, authorities and control than the media, as well as with specific crimes, migrants' obligations, costs and budgets, but also with children's rights and dignity.

Comparing civil society to media and politics, the following words are characteristic: in SUBJECT *family, children, parents, mother, father, house, at home*, divorce, *livelihood, together*; in MIGRATION *irregularity*; in RIGHTS *basic rights, dignity, freedom, human rights, right to family, children's rights, right to health, right to education*; in WORK *workers, employer, companies, labour rights, vulnerable, agriculture, delivery, care, safety*; in WELFARE *basic care, welfare, childcare*; in CRISIS *crisis, climate, famine, drought, oppression, revolution, persecution, ethnic cleansing*; in CRIME *accusations, allegations, hate speech, discrimination, victims*; in PLACES *Afghanistan, Africa, Sudan*.

This indicates that civil society differs from media and politics in emphasising the subjective experience and lived reality of irregular migrants, their family relations, household and livelihood as well as specific rights and their vulnerability. Additional key terms relate to specific crises and causes of migration as well as to crimes committed against irregular migrants. In sum, the perspective here is substantially different from both media and politics.

In terms of semantic groups, and the semantic preoccupations they indicate, civil society is by far the most attentive to SUBJECT, MIGRATION and RIGHTS, while giving little weight to POLITICS. In contrast, the media focus most on Work and Crime, while largely neglecting SUBJECT; while political discourse is preoccupied with POLITICS, especially GOVERNMENT and POLICY, as well as WORK and COSTS, while disregarding SUBJECT and RIGHTS.

Collocations, i.e., the habitual associations of key terms — which tend to influence the perception of the term itself — also differ between the three corpora. For example, *migrants* is associated mainly with *illegal, influx, arrived, more, come, unpermitted* and *border* in the media, and with *refugee, illegal, irregular, people smuggling, numbers, taking in* and *labour* in politics; in contrast, civil society associates it with *countries of origin, irregular, rights, seeking, protection, work, labour, human rights, dignity, families, life* and *community*. While the media associate *migration* with *irregular, illegal, limit, bordering, stem, fight, stop, reduce* and *end*, politics link it to *refugees, irregular, federal authority, integration, flight, illegal, steer, limit, reduce, border management, direct* and *stop*, and civil society to *integration, central, refugees, asylum, crisis, climate, safe, irregular, war, regularisation, manifold* and *forced*.

In short, the discourses around migrants and migration constructs different realities for their audiences. Migrants in the media are portrayed as an overwhelming, illegal force crossing the borders; migrants in politics are painted as indistinguishable from refugees, whether illegal or irregular, that come in growing numbers and seek labour; whereas civil society offers an alternative version where migrants might be irregular but are people who have a place they come from, have a life and families, rights and dignity. Migration, in contrast, is portrayed by the media as an abstract entity that, whether irregular or illegal, should be limited, stemmed, fought, stopped, reduced or ended; in politics, migration is constructed as irregular or illegal, closely linked to refugees, something that should be limited, managed or stopped;

whereas civil society portrays irregular migration as a central issue for Germany, linked to integration and refugees, which is driven by manifold crises and calls for regularisation.

In comparing the narratives used by media, politics and civil society, we want to highlight the alternative strategies employed by civil society. First, irregularised migrants appear in narrative contexts much more commonly, whereas media and politics tend to describe them more often. Second, there are more individualised narratives about migrants and their families in a variety of settings, not only flight and migration but also everyday life in Germany. Third, such narratives are also more often about women than about young men, and they give various forms of agency to migrants. Fourth, we also note that these narratives tend to appear at the end or, less frequently, at the beginning of texts, are very short, and seem to serve illustrative purposes. Across the qualitative sample, migrants are most often portrayed in physical and emotional activities, less common in verbal activities – which indicates the extent to which they are given a voice.

## 6.  Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, our corpus-based analysis shows that terminology around irregularity is used inconsistently, especially in the media, without adhering to legal terms; it is therefore characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty and bias. Such bias pervades both media and politics, linking to preconceptions of gender, origin and religion: when specified, migrants tend to be male, young and Muslim. When they are associated with crime, they are always specified as young men. In contrast, civil society tells **alternative narratives** that include women, families and children in everyday settings.

Our study thus provides evidence for the low level of expertise and distinction in politics and the media. At the same time, there is a high urgency and demand in both domains to point to personalized groups in order to stigmatize, label and ultimately frame a socio-cultural group that can be **blamed or victimized.** Irregularity as such, and the manifold issues that are related to it, is not the narrative that is in focus; instead, media and politics in their own distinct ways filter out the target groups and create figures that are hardly based on evidence. Such preoccupations improve neither knowledge production nor the quality of the discourse in the public and political spheres.

We thus observe a beginning process of shifting the attention in media and political domains to the imaginations of people that might be seen as irregular migrants, i.e., an unnecessary and biased portrayal (blaming/victimising) of the phenomenon of irregularity. By foregrounding either **individualised suffering** and/or **the need to control migration** as an abstract force, media and politics divert attention from political failures and inaction on the one hand and from the linkage between migration and societal-political radicalisation and polarisation on the other hand. There are notable exceptions to this trend inasmuch as quality media often link individualised narratives to the larger geopolitical context.

While all three corpora feature **impersonalised, abstract** alongside **personalised narratives**, they differ considerably in ratio. Politics uses the largest ratio of abstract narratives, followed by the media, while civil society has an almost balanced ratio between the two. Moreover, personalised narratives are used differently by tabloid/quality media inasmuch as they are linked to different morals: emotional appeal vs critiques of geopolitics. The narratives analysed in civil society are successful in giving a more fine-grained , human reality to irregularity and in addressing the **intersectional complexity of vulnerability** for irregular migrants in terms of **family and labour**.

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