



# I-CLAIM

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

## Understanding and Reframing Migration Narratives:

Towards an Evidence-based  
Policy Discourse in Europe

*Policy Brief*

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## Executive Summary

Migration remains a pivotal issue in European public discourse, influencing governance strategies, media narratives, and civil society advocacy. The framing of irregularised migration varies significantly across national contexts, shaped by political ideologies, socio-economic concerns, and historical migration patterns. This policy brief, based on discourse analysis from the I-CLAIM project, examines migration narratives in Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, the UK, and the EU to identify dominant themes and their impact on policymaking.

The findings on narratives highlight that migration is increasingly securitised, economic narratives either depict migrants as contributors or burdens, and civil society plays a crucial role in counteracting restrictive migration discourses but with limited capacity to reframe the debate. Regarding the representation of irregularised migrants across media and politics discourse, they are predominantly portrayed as economic units – in terms of the skills or talents needed, their future contributions to pensions, as a means of addressing the demographic challenges of aging societies –, as burdens and threats, or as workers and rights-holders – entitled to decent working conditions, living standards and access to rights. It is only in civil society discourse that they are represented as people with identities, families and individual histories.

Key findings reveal stark divergences in migration discourse across Europe, which indicate both strong links with national policy and tensions at the level of EU policy. While Poland and the UK frame migration primarily as a security threat, in Italy and Germany securitisation is overshadowed by concerns over labour shortages and humanitarian obligations, and Finland and the Netherlands emphasise integration, legal pathways, and labour contributions. Media narratives often amplify crisis framings, reinforcing public anxieties about migration and influencing restrictive policy measures. Political actors use migration discourse strategically, with right-wing parties generally emphasising border control and sovereignty, while left-leaning parties focus on governance and integration. However, this tendency has recently become more fragmented, with parties like the German Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (technically left-wing but xenophobic) breaking the traditional mould. Moreover, centre/moderate parties might fall on either category depending on the country or specific party's ideology and history.

Additionally, migration discourse is often racialised and gendered, with young male migrants—especially from Africa and the Middle East—being depicted as security threats, while women and children are framed as “deserving” refugees. Economic narratives are equally polarised, with migrants portrayed as essential workers in some contexts and as a burden on public resources in others. Meanwhile, civil society organisations challenge crisis narratives and advocate for migrants' legal protections, integration, and labour rights.

To promote a balanced and evidence-based migration discourse, this policy brief recommends:

- (I) Reducing polarisation by promoting factual migration narratives, supporting public awareness campaigns, and including civil society organisations in discourse around policy.
- (II) Enhancing media accountability by differentiating usage of migration terminology and training journalists on ethical reporting.
- (III) Addressing misleading political rhetoric by ensuring government transparency and compliance with human rights frameworks.

Without decisive action, the dominance of securitised and polarised migration narratives will continue to undermine effective migration governance. Policymakers, media stakeholders, and civil society must work together to shift discourse toward a more just, informed, and sustainable approach to migration policy in Europe.

## Introduction

Migration remains a defining issue in European discourse, shaping policy, media narratives, and civil society advocacy. The framing of migration as irregular varies significantly across national contexts, shaped by political ideologies, socio-economic factors, and historical migration patterns. Public discourse surrounding migration directly influences policymaking, public perception, and societal attitudes towards migrants. Misrepresentations and politically charged narratives can contribute to polarisation, hindering the development of balanced, effective migration policies. The challenge is further complicated by the fragmented nature of governance across European states, leading to inconsistencies in migration regulation, enforcement, and humanitarian obligations.

This policy brief, based on the I-CLAIM project's discourse analysis, explores how migration is constructed as irregular in media, politics, and civil society across Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, the UK, and the EU. By identifying dominant themes, linguistic patterns, and ideological contestations, this brief offers key insights and policy recommendations aimed at fostering a more balanced and informed migration discourse in Europe. Additionally, it emphasises the importance of aligning public narratives with factual, evidence-based discourse to enable constructive policymaking. Especially for elected officials, this highlights the obligation to not engage in hate speech, spread disinformation or become complicit in misinformation campaigns. A critical examination of how migration discourse evolves at national and EU levels underscores the need for more consistent and coordinated communication strategies by political institutions and actors to mitigate misinformation and promote evidence-based policies.

## Methodology

This research employs a systematic discourse analysis, combining large-scale corpus analysis with qualitative examination of narratives in media, political, and civil society discourse. The study spans a five-year period (2019–2023) and includes a comparative analysis of terminology, key collocations, and semantic framing. The methodology highlights how different societal actors influence migration discourse, shaping public perceptions and policy outcomes.

A corpus-based linguistic analysis was conducted to examine the frequency and association of migration-related terms, identifying dominant framings within national and EU-level discourse. The qualitative aspect of the research involved an in-depth examination of key narratives and their implications for policy development, identifying discrepancies between political, media, and civil society perspectives. This dual approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of how migration is framed across different spheres of influence, allowing for targeted recommendations to improve discourse and policy alignment.

Furthermore, the methodology includes a critical comparison of the terms used to describe migrants in different contexts. Across media, political, and civil society discourse, inconsistencies and biases in language

significantly affect public perception. By analysing patterns in terminology – such as the extent to which “illegal migrant,” “irregular migrant,” “asylum seeker,” and “refugee” are used interchangeably – the study reveals how selective framing influences policy discussions and public sentiment. This was the rationale for selecting specific key words to include texts into our data sets for analysis.

Additionally, qualitative discourse analysis was employed to examine the narrative structures surrounding migration. This includes identifying thematic clusters, such as security threats, economic impacts, humanitarian crises, and governance challenges. By mapping these thematic trends, the study sheds light on the ways in which different actors construct and contest migration narratives, providing a clearer picture of how migration policies are shaped (for details, please see the [Methodological Note](#)).

## Key Research Findings

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### RESEARCH FINDING #1:

#### Divergent Migration Discourses across Europe

Migration narratives vary widely across European nations, often reflecting each country's political climate, media landscape, and historical migration patterns. These variations create inconsistencies in migration governance and policy implementation, leading to fragmented approaches at the national and EU levels.

- **Security and Crisis Framing:** Countries with significant border pressures, such as Poland and Italy, frequently emphasise migration as a crisis, linking it to national security, sovereignty, and emergency management. This framing prioritises deterrence measures, increased border control, and restrictive policies. This leads to policies that prioritise militarised border enforcement and rapid deportation mechanisms while neglecting long-term integration solutions.
- **Governance and Policy-Oriented Approaches:** Nations such as Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands adopt a legal and procedural focus, discussing migration within governance frameworks. Migration is framed as a technical challenge requiring structured policy responses rather than an immediate crisis. These countries emphasise policy harmonisation within the EU, legal pathways and regularisation, and systematic integration efforts.
- **Sovereignty and Nationalism:** The UK, particularly in the post-Brexit context, emphasises border control and sovereignty, reinforcing migration as an issue of national security. Policies prioritise domestic control over migration flows, often framed as protecting national identity and social cohesion. The post-Brexit policy environment has led to increasingly restrictive measures aimed at deterring both regular and irregularised migration, including high-profile deportation policies and the expansion of detention centres.
- **Humanitarian and Economic Narratives:** Italy and Germany integrate concerns about labour market contributions and humanitarian obligations, while Dutch discourse focuses on procedural legality and asylum processes. Discussions about labour exploitation, particularly in agriculture and low-wage sectors, feature prominently in these narratives. Migration is often framed in economic terms, highlighting both the reliance on migrant labour in certain industries and concerns about labour market saturation and wage suppression.

At the EU level, migration discourse reflects a balancing act between governance, international obligations, and political considerations – this is problematic inasmuch as the Commission should be the Guardian of the Treaties rather than a politicised body. For the Parliament as a deliberative body, such discourse is more understandable, yet it risks deteriorating into hate speech and racism. However, securitisation remains prevalent in border control and return policies, with frequent references to external border enforcement, and cooperation with third countries to manage migration flows. The overarching aim is to make policies and legislation stronger, more ‘effective’ and ‘coherent’, with strength, effectiveness and coherency defined in security-heavy ways, and often in disregard of EU law, international legal standards, labour standards, etc. In the EP, especially on the left, there is also a notable focus on burden-sharing. Thus, while discourse in the EP emphasises shared responsibility, it often fails to reconcile divergent national priorities, leading to inconsistent enforcement and conflicting policy approaches.

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## RESEARCH FINDING #2:

### Media Narratives Reinforce Crisis and Securitisation

Media play a crucial role in shaping public perception of migration, often acting as a conduit for political narratives. Across European media landscapes, migration reporting is characterised by polarised framings that either reinforce security concerns or emphasise humanitarian perspectives.

- **Securitisating Narratives: Polish and UK media** frequently frame migration as a national security threat, emphasising border crises and irregularised migration as an “invasion.” This framing fuels public anxiety, contributing to stricter policy measures and increased public support for restrictive migration controls. Sensationalised media coverage often correlates with spikes in anti-immigrant sentiment and political rhetoric calling for border fortification.
- **Humanitarian Focus: Italian media highlight** Mediterranean crossings and migrant labour exploitation, often emphasising the plight of vulnerable groups. However, this framing can also reinforce perceptions of helplessness rather than agency among migrants. While humanitarian narratives can generate sympathy, they often fail to portray migrants as active contributors to society.
- **Evidence-based Approaches: German and Finnish media** incorporate policy-oriented discussions but still reflect crisis narratives. While some outlets attempt to present migration as a manageable policy issue, others emphasise socio-economic pressures and political tensions arising from migration. Public broadcasting services tend to provide more neutral, fact-based reporting, whereas commercial media often reflect more polarised positions.
- **Terminological Confusion:** Across European media, inconsistent use of terms such as *illegal migrant*, *irregular migrant*, *asylum seeker*, and *refugee* creates misinformation, leading to public misunderstanding of migration dynamics. The interchangeable use of legally distinct terms fosters confusion and shapes public discourse in ways that may not align with reality and reinforce crisis and securitisation.

To mitigate these issues, media outlets must adhere to journalistic standards that promote factual accuracy, avoid sensationalism, and ensure clarity in reporting migration-related topics. Greater investment in journalist training and ethical reporting guidelines can improve media accountability and public understanding of migration issues.

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**RESEARCH FINDING #3:****Exclusion in the Name of Protection**

Migration is a highly politicised topic, often used to align with electoral concerns and ideological divisions. Political discourse frequently employs double speak—framing restrictive migration policies as humanitarian efforts. For instance, policies criminalising migration in Italy and the UK are often justified as measures against human trafficking and unsafe crossings, neutralising criticism by appealing to humanitarian values. This strategy, highlighted in the [EU-level report](#), uses overtly ‘humanitarian rhetoric’ to obscure the true impact of restrictive policies, presenting them as protective rather than exclusionary.

- Political actors across Europe use migration rhetoric to consolidate their voter base, particularly during election cycles. Right-wing parties often emphasise border security and deportation as tools to safeguard national sovereignty, while left-wing parties advocate for more inclusive approaches, such as labour integration programs and legal pathways. This divide creates significant policy shifts depending on which party holds power, leading to unpredictability in migration governance.
- The securitisation of migration has also been used as a political bargaining tool in negotiations within the EU, particularly around burden-sharing agreements. Certain Member States resist taking in asylum seekers, leveraging migration as a means of securing concessions on other political issues. This tactic exacerbates tensions between EU institutions and national governments, hindering the implementation of cohesive migration policies.

At the national level, political narratives on migration often reflect broader societal anxieties. In countries experiencing economic instability, migration is more likely to be framed as a threat to labour markets and public services. By contrast, in countries with labour shortages, migration narratives are more likely to emphasise economic necessity. These shifting frames illustrate the instrumentalisation of migration discourse to serve specific political objectives, rather than to advance coherent, evidence-based policy solutions.

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**RESEARCH FINDING #4:****Gendered and Racialised Migration Narratives in Public Discourse**

Migration discourse across Europe, in both individual Member States and the European Commission as well as European Parliament, is deeply influenced by gendered and racialised narratives, which shape public perception, media coverage, and policymaking. Women and children are frequently framed as deserving victims, particularly in humanitarian crises, while young male migrants—especially from Africa and the Middle East—are often constructed as security threats. This distinction reinforces selective compassion in migration policies, where asylum protections are more readily extended to those seen as vulnerable, while restrictive border controls and deportation measures disproportionately target male migrants. In countries such as Poland and the UK, this narrative is reinforced by political rhetoric and media coverage, where migrant men are frequently associated with crime, disorder, or economic competition. In contrast, Ukrainian refugees—predominantly women and children—have been overwhelmingly framed as legitimate asylum seekers, illustrating how racialised narratives intersect with gendered perceptions of vulnerability and social acceptability.

These biases have significant policy consequences, influencing migration governance and integration strategies across Europe. Policies that prioritise the rapid processing and accommodation of deserving



groups, such as women and children from Ukraine, stand in stark contrast to more restrictive approaches toward asylum seekers from Africa, the Middle East, or South Asia. Media portrayals that depict young male migrants as potential threats contribute to securitisation policies, justifying harsh border control measures and detention practices. The racialisation of migration also manifests in labour policies, where racialised minorities often face greater scrutiny, exploitation, or legal precarity in low-wage sectors. Addressing these disparities requires a more balanced discourse that recognises the structural vulnerabilities migrants face beyond gendered and racialised stereotypes, ensuring that migration policies are shaped by principles of equity and universal human rights rather than selective humanitarianism.

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**RESEARCH FINDING #5:****Economic Narratives: Migrants as a 'Burden' vs. Contributors**

Economic narratives surrounding migration in Europe remain deeply polarised, with competing discourses framing migrants as either essential economic contributors or burdens on public resources. In countries like Italy and Germany, migrants are often depicted as an integral part of the workforce, particularly in sectors facing labour shortages such as agriculture, construction, and domestic care. Civil society and left-leaning political actors emphasise the economic benefits of migration, arguing that migrants sustain key industries, contribute to tax revenues, and counteract demographic decline. This perspective aligns with broader policy discussions advocating for structured legal pathways to employment and integration programs that enhance migrants' economic participation. However, despite this positive framing, concerns about labour exploitation persist, especially regarding undocumented migrants, who often work under precarious conditions with limited protections. Media discourse in these countries frequently highlights migrant labour contributions, though right-leaning outlets sometimes frame them as undercutting wages or taking jobs from native workers.

Conversely, in Poland and the United Kingdom, economic narratives about migration are often intertwined with welfare concerns and securitisation rhetoric. Right-wing political actors and media outlets frequently depict irregularised migrants as a drain on public services, framing them as an undue burden on healthcare, housing, and welfare systems. In the UK, for instance, migration discourse is heavily shaped by post-Brexit sovereignty narratives, reinforcing the idea that migration control is necessary to protect domestic economic stability. In Poland, migrants are often differentiated based on nationality, with Ukrainian workers seen as necessary for the labour market, while Middle Eastern and African migrants are more commonly framed as potential welfare dependents or security risks. This distinction underscores how economic narratives are often racialised, with political and media discourse selectively highlighting which groups are perceived as valuable contributors and which are framed as economic liabilities. The contrast in these economic narratives across Europe not only influences public opinion but also directly shapes migration policies, determining access to labour markets, welfare benefits, and legal pathways to regularisation.

**RESEARCH FINDING #6:****Inclusion of Civil Society to Counter-Balance Securitising Tendencies**

Civil society actors—including NGOs, advocacy groups, and humanitarian organisations—can play a crucial role in counterbalancing dominant political and media discourses on migration. Policymakers should listen and engage with civil society actors to have access to, and be able to provide, more evidence-based and rights-compliant discourses and policies. This can counter-balance the tendency of electoral campaign strategies to reinforce crisis framings: civil society organisations provide alternative narratives that emphasise human rights, economic contributions, and social integration.

- **Legal Aid and Rights-Based Approaches:** In Germany, Finland, and the Netherlands, civil society actors focus on legal assistance for migrants, advocating for more transparent and inclusive migration policies. They work towards providing legal pathways for regularisation, highlighting the inconsistencies in asylum processes and supporting appeals against deportation orders. Their efforts have influenced national debates by exposing gaps in legal protections and urging governments to comply with international human rights obligations.
- **Resistance to Restrictive Policies:** In Poland and the UK, civil society groups actively challenge restrictive migration policies, drawing attention to the human cost of border militarisation, detention, and deportation. Activist networks document abuses at detention centres, push back against discriminatory immigration policies, and advocate for alternatives such as community-based support programs. These organisations also provide direct aid to migrants who face destitution due to exclusionary policies.
- **Humanitarian Support and Advocacy:** In Italy, civil society plays a vital role in providing humanitarian support for migrants arriving through the Mediterranean. NGOs operate search-and-rescue missions, run shelters, and offer essential services such as healthcare and education to newly arrived migrants. Their work is often contested by right-wing political actors, who attempt to criminalise humanitarian efforts under anti-smuggling laws, demonstrating how civil society groups operate in politically charged environments.
- **Economic Contributions and Labor Rights:** Across Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands, civil society actors highlight the economic contributions of migrants, particularly in sectors experiencing labour shortages. They advocate for fair wages, improved working conditions, and protections against exploitation, especially for undocumented workers. These organisations challenge the securitised framing of migration by presenting evidence that migrants play a critical role in sustaining national economies and addressing demographic challenges.
- **EU-Level Advocacy:** Civil society organisations at the EU level work to hold policymakers accountable, urging them to prioritise rights-based approaches in migration governance. They challenge the EU Commission's focus on deportation and border externalisation by promoting policies that expand legal migration pathways and enhance migrant protections. These groups actively engage with EU institutions, contribute to consultations, and work alongside international human rights bodies to influence migration policy debates. Indeed, EU civil society is the only actor consistently using a rights-based approach to irregularised migration at the EU level, despite also remaining somewhat constrained by the EU policy discourse, being forced to operate within the same frameworks and speak the same language as the institutions to have an impact on EU policy and legislation.



Despite their significant impact, civil society organisations often struggle against powerful political and media narratives that prioritise securitisation over humanitarian considerations. They face increasing criminalisation in some states, funding constraints, and regulatory barriers that limit their ability to operate effectively. Strengthening the role of civil society in migration discourse requires greater collaboration with policymakers, the media, and international institutions to amplify rights-based, evidence-driven approaches to migration governance.

## Policy recommendations

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### RECOMMENDATION #1:

#### Reducing Polarisation in Migration Discourse

Policymakers must ensure that migration discourse moves beyond securitisation narratives to incorporate:

- **Regular Pathways and Economic Participation:** Policies and the discourse around them should emphasise migrant contributions to labour markets and social integration.
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** These should counteract misinformation and promote informed debates on migration.
- **Balanced Policy Messaging:** EU institutions and national governments must ensure that migration is not framed solely as a security issue but also as a governance and economic matter.
- **Strengthening Civil Society's Role in Policy Discourse:** Governments should recognise civil society as a critical stakeholder in migration governance
- **Collaborative Discourse:** Include civil society actors in migration policy discourse and narratives.

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### RECOMMENDATION #2:

#### Media Accountability and Terminological Accuracy

Given our findings on terminological slippage and how this plays into crisis narratives and securitisation, the media must play a more responsible role in shaping discourse about irregularised migration:

- **Standardising Terminology:** Ensure that terms such as *asylum seeker*, *refugee*, and *irregular migrant* are used correctly.
- **Training for Journalists:** Ensure evidence-based and comprehensive reporting on migration issues to prevent misinformation and one-sided or selective narratives.
- **Adjust Guidelines for Ethical Reporting:** Journalistic standards should be updated to prevent reproducing narratives and representations that pander to sensationalism, foster crisis frames or securitisation.

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**RECOMMENDATION #3:****Addressing “Double Speak” in Migration Policy**

Governments should be held accountable for ambiguous or misleading language in migration policy, especially where positive framing obscures problematic policies:

- **Greater Transparency:** Policies should clearly differentiate between humanitarian efforts and restrictive migration controls.
- **Human Rights Compliance:** Ensure that border control measures do not violate international obligations.
- **Public Scrutiny of Migration Rhetoric:** Advocacy groups and policymakers should challenge misleading political narratives.

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