Migration Research to Policy

Deep dives

Evidence, Values and Narratives

Strengthening the Factual Basis for Migration Policy Discussions

Authors chapters 2 and 3

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The project has established the Migration Research to Policy Co-Lab, which has both a physical and virtual presence and includes a Research Exchange, Engagement Hub, and Training Facility.

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Evidence, Values and Narratives: Strengthening the Factual Basis for Migration Policy Discussions

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Executive Summary

This paper summarises key findings for policymakers from Work Package 3: Behavioural Insights as part of the Migration to Research Policy Co-Lab, run by the INNOVATE Consortium, a Horizon Europe-funded coordination project. Here we summarise research on migration evidence, public trust, values, and narratives across Europe.

Evidence matters, but it works through trust, values, and narratives. Migration debates will become more evidence-based not simply by providing more facts, but by communicating those facts in ways that are credible, balanced, and responsive to how different publics understand migration. Evidence can improve understanding and shift attitudes, but it should be communicated in ways that preserve credibility and resonate with different audiences.

Migration debates often remain disconnected from the best available evidence. This is not mainly because policymakers reject research. Migration policymaker factual beliefs broadly align with that of migration researchers, suggesting the main barrier to research impact is public polarisation and low support for evidence-based policy among parts of the electorate. Research can shift some public beliefs and policy preferences, but effects can trigger backlash if citizens perceive researchers as advocating a preferred political agenda. Trust is better protected when researchers adopt an *"honest broker"* role: clarifying trade-offs and consequences across multiple policy options rather than arguing for a single "best" policy.

Migration narratives influence not only opinions about migrants but also emotions, solidarity, collective action, and institutional identity—meaning effective communication must be tailored to audience, context, and framing. Narratives shape politics beyond policy detail. Migration debates are also contests over meaning and identity: which stories resonate with which publics, and under what conditions.

Our research shows that:

1) Migration research can change minds
   - Policymakers and researchers are broadly aligned on facts. The "research-to-policy" gap is less about decision-makers rejecting evidence and more about factual belief polarisation in public opinion.
   - Many citizens accept researcher-provided information even when it challenges prior beliefs; some subsequently shift their policy preferences.

- Belief-challenging information can reduce trust in migration research among those whose views are threatened unless researchers explicitly clarify they are not advocating a particular policy.

2) Values and policy advocacy roles are important in migration research

- Debate should move beyond objective vs biased. Migration research engages values and the key is transparency and synergy with policymakers and publics.
- Value alignment differs across groups, migration research tends to be more *universalist* than policymaking, which often has a more *particularist* emphasis; the public may hold a more mixed value set.
- Stealth advocacy is widely viewed as harmful, both researchers and policymakers worry about experts presenting as neutral while advancing personal policy preferences. The role of "honest broker" can be adopted, outlining consequences of multiple options is broadly supported, defensible, and effective.

3) Migration narratives move people

- Narrative effects are conditional, impact depends on message, audience predispositions (prior beliefs, moral values, grievance sensitivity, territorial identity), and context.
- The framing of migration matters, threat frames intensify negative affect, positive frames can improve evaluations.
- EU identification can be protective, stronger EU identification correlates with solidarity and reduced attraction to radical mobilisation.
- Institutional narratives are mixed, official frames are not equally resonant across publics. Automated tools (including LLMs) can scale narrative analysis, but human judgement remains essential.

Key Recommendations

• Reach out to the public. There is both an urgent need and a clear potential for public outreach by migration researchers.

• Strengthen credibility by engaging in a nuanced discussion about values in migration research and how they can be coordinated in synergy with policymakers and citizens.

• Think carefully about which role to choose as an expert in policy debates and, in particular, consider acting as an "honest broker" who presents a menu of credible policy options and their likely consequences, including uncertainties and trade-offs.

• Consider using trust-preserving messaging: when presenting belief-challenging insights, explicitly state that the goal is explanation (evidence), not persuasion (advocacy).

• Design outreach for polarisation: test messages experimentally, segment audiences, and avoid one-size-fits-all frames.

• Co-produce evidence communication: partner with researchers to communicate consequences of different policy routes without pushing a single preferred option.

• Expect narrative contestation: complement policy with communication strategies attentive to identity, emotion, and solidarity—not merely factual correction.

• Frame with care: avoid escalating threat cues unless the goal is mobilisation; where appropriate, use positive or efficacy-based frames that support constructive engagement.

• Combine methods: integrate experiments, political psychology, computational analysis (including LLM-assisted mapping of narratives), and interpretive expertise.

Glossary

Factual belief polarisation	The phenomenon that what citizens or elites believe to be true is associated with their political leaning, such as party preference, ideology, or issue attitudes.
Values in science	The epistemic and non-epistemic values that shape what questions researchers ask, what concepts they choose, how they interpret their findings, and how they communicate their insights.
Policy advocacy roles	The different roles that scientists and experts can take regarding whether and how they weigh in on policy debates.
Researchers	Scholars who are affiliated with a university and conduct academic research on migration or migration policies.
Policymakers	Public officials from the EU or its member states who are involved in the design or implementation of migration policy.
Narratives	Narratives link events, actors, and motivations into coherent meaning structures, shaping how political worlds are experienced and understood.
Core belief	An ingrained, fundamental, self-related idea that shapes an individuals' thoughts, feelings, and actions on a particular socio-political issue such as migration, often without realising.
Frame	Designed to influence the perceptions of a reader by selecting aspects of reality, focusing on these aspects to encourage a specific point of view.
Narrative frame	Designed to expose the reader to a specific contextualisation of an issue.
LLMs	A Large Language Model is an AI which has been trained on large amounts of text. It can be used to analyse, summarise and categorise large amounts of textual data.

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1. Introduction

Migration research has yielded a wealth of insights, yet policy debates often seem disconnected from the best available evidence. What people believe to be true about migration is heavily intertwined with their political attitudes and identities, as well as with values and emotions. This deep dive examines how migration researchers and policymakers can navigate this interconnectedness of values and beliefs, in order to communicate evidence more effectively and strengthen the factual basis for policy discussions. First, Chapter 2 examines what European policymakers and citizens from different political camps believe to be true regarding key issues in migration research, how these beliefs differ from those of migration researchers, and whether public outreach activities by researchers can narrow this gap and shift public opinion. Chapter 3 then addresses the question of how the credibility of such public outreach activities can be strengthened by managing and communicating values and policy advocacy roles in migration research. Chapter 4 concludes this deep dive by zooming out to the big picture of migration narratives that embed facts and connect them to values and identities. This chapter examines how narratives shape emotions, attitudes, identification, and action, as well as how such narratives can be leveraged to improve the communication of evidence on migration.

2. Changing minds with migration research

Note. This chapter provides a summary of the following academic article:

- Rekker R., Çakmak, H., Milazzo, E., & Geddes, A. (2026). Changing minds with migration research: A survey experiment of European citizens, policymakers, and researchers. *Manuscript in preparation.*

2.1 Literature

Migration research has yielded a wealth of insights, yet policy debates often seem disconnected from the best available evidence (Natter & Welfens, 2024), as public misperceptions about migration are widespread. For instance, many citizens misperceive migration statistics, such as the size of the immigrant population, or key aspects of migration policy, such as the grounds on which refugees are admitted (Lutz & Bitschnau, 2023; Thorson & Abdelaaty, 2023). What people believe to be true about politicized issues, such as migration or climate change, often depends heavily on their political leaning (Rekker, 2022). This *factual belief polarisation* is driven by individual-level factors such as motivated reasoning, as well as by system-level processes such as the rise of new media and the resulting fragmentation of citizens' information environments (Rekker, 2021). Fuelled by populist parties, citizens' trust in epistemic authorities, such as journalists and scientists, has become increasingly politicized (Rekker, 2026). This study therefore examined what European policymakers and citizens from different political camps believe to be true regarding key issues in migration research and how these beliefs differ from those of migration researchers.

To assess migration researchers' ability to narrow this potential gap, this study moreover examined to what extent policymakers and citizens are willing to trust insights from migration research. Meta-analytic studies show that citizens' misperceptions can (at least temporarily) be reduced by 'corrective information' on a variety of issues (Carey et al., 2022; Chan et al., 2017). For example, many experiments have shown that citizens become more likely to believe that climate change is human-caused when they are presented with insights from climate scientists (Većkalov et al., 2024). It is unclear, however, whether migration researchers have a similar ability to shift people's factual beliefs, given that the social sciences are trusted considerably less than the natural sciences (Pfänder & Mercier, 2026; Rekker, 2025). This study therefore presented participants with a variety of insights from migration research and asked them about their trust in each statement.

Using an experimental design, this study finally examined whether insights from migration research can shift citizens' attitudes on migration policy, as well as their

trust in migration research. Although the existing literature has quite consistently shown that corrective information can shift people's factual beliefs, it has produced mixed results regarding whether corrective information can similarly change policy attitudes (Rekker, 2024). Whereas some people may change their opinion on migration policy when they are presented with insights that challenge their existing beliefs, others may instead (or in addition) engage in motivated reasoning by lowering their trust in the field when they realize many of its insights challenge their attitudes.

2.2 Methodology

To answer these questions, a survey was conducted among 100 migration researchers, 44 migration policymakers, and 7,275 European citizens. The 100 migration researchers were scholars who are affiliated with a university and conduct academic research on migration or migration policies, with relevance for the EU context. About half worked in political science or sociology, while the other half worked in a variety of other social science fields, economics, history, and law. The 44 policymakers were public officials from the EU or its member states who are involved in the design or implementation of migration policy. The vast majority of participating policymakers were civil servants, with the remainder being elected representatives or their staff. They were, on average, about equally involved in the design and implementation of migration policy. Just over half worked at the European level and just under half at the national level. Researchers and policymakers were recruited through mailing lists, personal invitations, and promotion on LinkedIn. The 7,275 citizens were eligible voters from, in equal numbers, Germany, France, Italy, and Spain. In each country, respondents were quota sampled from an existing panel to obtain a nationally representative sample in terms of age, gender, education, region, and income. The resulting sample was almost representative with respect to vote choice. Only non-voters were clearly underrepresented, which was accounted for by weighting the analyses. To compare findings across the political spectrum, citizens were classified into three political camps based on their party's European affiliation: left-wing (GUE/NGL, G/EFA, S&D), mainstream right (RE, EPP), or far-right (ECR, PfE, ESN).

Researchers and citizens were asked 22 factual questions about key issues in migration research. Policymakers were asked 11 of these questions to reduce the survey duration. An example of an item is *'The integration of non-European immigrants has failed.'* For each of the 22 statements, respondents indicated to what extent they believe it to be true on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (Completely false) to 5 (Completely true). These 22 statements were adopted from Hein de Haas's (2023) book *'How Migration Really Works'*, in which the distinguished migration researcher discusses 22 insights from migration research that challenge commonly held beliefs. Rather than treating them as definitive truths, this study

used these insights as an ideal starting point for an empirical examination of how the factual beliefs of policymakers and citizens differ from those of researchers regarding key questions in migration research.

After answering the 22 factual belief questions, all policymakers and a randomly selected half of citizens were presented with a short summary of Hein de Haas's insights, which were introduced as *'insights that migration researchers have shared based on their research.'* An example is '*The integration of non-European immigrants is remarkably successful. Within one or two generations, even immigrants from entirely different cultural backgrounds generally make impressive progress in language, education, employment, and income.'* For each insight, policymakers and citizens indicated how much they trust it on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (No trust at all) to 10 (Complete trust). At the beginning and the end of the survey, citizens indicated on the same 11-point scale how much they trust migration research as a credible source of information on immigration, as well as whether they think the current immigration policy is too harsh and restrictive (0), about right (5), or too soft and permissive (10).

2.3 Results

The results show that migration researchers take a relatively clear position on 11 of the 22 factual belief questions. With few exceptions, the factual beliefs of policymakers are remarkably similar to those of researchers. What citizens believe to be true, however, differs markedly from the position of migration researchers on many questions. The issues that stand out most are the impact of migration on the welfare state and crime, which are characterized by a wide gap between researchers and citizens and an equally pronounced factual belief polarisation between left-wing and far-right voters. These findings hint that the challenge for migration research to have impact is perhaps not so much that policymakers are unaware or unconvinced of its insights, but rather that policymakers are faced with a lack of support for evidence-based policies among a public that is polarised in its factual beliefs.

Policymakers furthermore expressed consistently high levels of trust in migration research (7.4 on a scale from 0 to 10) and its insights, which is unsurprising given that their beliefs already align closely with those of researchers. For citizens, the picture is nuanced but overall hopeful for migration researchers who consider reaching out. Citizens' base level of trust in migration researchers (4.5) is lower than their general trust in scientists (6.3), but it is higher than their trust in other information sources on migration, such as news media (4.2) or politicians (2.8). On average, citizens expressed trust levels close to the centre of the scale for most insights. This indicates that citizens do not blindly accept what migration researchers have to say, but they certainly do not disregard all insights without

consideration either. Even on heavily contested issues, such as whether migration affects the welfare state and crime rates, citizens expressed trust levels only slightly below the midpoint of the scale.

A more specific question is whether citizens also trust insights that challenge their own beliefs. How likely is it, for example, that someone who believes immigration drives up crime rates (score of 4 or 5 on the belief item) still expresses trust (6 or higher) in the insight from migration research that challenges this belief? The results show that, in almost half of cases (41%), citizens trust insights from migration research even when they challenge their previously held beliefs. This number was lowest among far-right voters but, even in this political camp, belief-challenging insights were trusted in about one third of cases (33%). This again shows that many citizens – on both sides of the political spectrum – are willing to at least consider insights from migration research, even when they challenge their existing beliefs and opinions.

Given this relative openness to insights from migration research, it is conceivable that these insights may also change people's opinion on migration policy. Indeed, respondents who were presented with insights from migration research scored significantly lower on the post-test than respondents who were not presented with insights. Although the effect size was small (0.13 points on an 11-point scale), this indicates that insights from migration research can change people's opinion, even on the main axis of political contestation over migration policy. Moreover, this opinion change occurred about equally across the political spectrum. Respondents were also asked directly if they thought the insights had confirmed or changed their opinion on migration, or neither. About one in six respondents (16.5%) answered that they had changed their opinion on migration. The overall conclusion, therefore, is that whereas a large minority is willing to consider belief-challenging insights from migration researcher, a smaller minority also changes its opinion. At the same time, however, respondents also reported significantly less trust in migration research after they had been presented with its insights. This suggests that, even though many people take migration research seriously, some may also engage in motivated reasoning by discounting migration research as a source of credible information when its insights conflict with their attitudes. Chapter 3 will discuss how migration researchers may avoid this backlash by explicitly emphasizing that they are not advocating for any particular policy.

Key findings. Changing minds with migration research

• The factual beliefs of migration policymakers are remarkably similar to those of migration researchers.

• What citizens believe to be true, however, often differs markedly from the beliefs of migration researchers. Moreover, most migration issues are characterized by a deep factual belief polarisation between left-wing and far-right voters. Perhaps the challenge for migration research to have impact is not so much that policymakers are unaware or unconvinced of its insights, but rather that policymakers face a lack of support for evidence-based policies among a polarised public.

• The ability of migration researchers to shift public beliefs and opinion is limited, but certainly not absent. Many citizens trust insights from migration researchers, even when they challenge their own beliefs. Moreover, these insights lead some to change their opinion on migration policy. These findings underline both the urgency and the potential for public outreach by migration researchers.

• Informing citizens with belief-challenging insights can come at a price for public trust in migration research, but this backlash effect can be avoided when researchers emphasize that they are not advocating for any particular policy (see Chapter 3).

3. Values and policy advocacy roles in migration research

Note. This chapter provides a summary of the following academic articles:

- Rekker R., Çakmak, H., Milazzo, E., & Geddes, A. (2026). Values and policy advocacy roles in migration research: A survey on alignment with European policymakers and citizens. *Manuscript in preparation.*
- Većkalov, B., & Rekker R. (2026). Policy advocacy by scientists in a polarized context: Preserving credibility by separating evidence on migration from politics. *Manuscript in preparation.*

3.1 Literature

There is broad agreement among philosophers of science that science cannot, and probably should not, be entirely value free (Elliott, 2017). Non-epistemic values can, for example, determine what questions researchers ask, what concepts they choose, how they interpret their findings, and how they communicate their insights. Crucially, however, this does *not* imply that researchers are biased in favour of predetermined conclusions (Wilholt, 2009). This issue has received extensive attention in the philosophy of the natural sciences. For the social sciences, however, public discourse still often pits 'objective' against 'biased' research. This study aims to move beyond this simplistic binary by examining values in migration research in light of normative *demarcation strategies*. Study 1 examined where this value demarcation has already been achieved in terms of alignment with policymakers and citizens, and where there is room for improvement. Moreover, study 1 addressed the related question of how migration researchers see their role in policy debates and how this aligns with the expectations and perceptions of policymakers and citizens. Study 2 then examined the effectiveness of each role in maintaining the credibility of migration researchers who engage with polarised policy debates.

This examination focused on two value sets that are particularly relevant to migration research: *universalist values*, which emphasize the rights of all human beings regardless of origin, and *particularist values*, which prioritize the specific concerns and interests of native citizens. Universalist values may, for example, inspire migration research on the safety of refugees, the working conditions of labour migrants, or the discrimination faced by minorities. Particularist values, on the other hand, can guide migration research on the risks and opportunities of migration for the economic interests and cultural preferences of native citizens, such as the availability of jobs and social services or the changing cultural identity of neighbourhoods. Both value sets can – and inevitably will – coexist in migration

research, which raises the question of how they should be weighted relative to each other.

This normative question can be addressed through various value demarcation strategies that have been proposed by philosophers of science (Holman & Wilholt, 2022). According to *axiological demarcation strategies*, some values are inherently more appropriate for scientific inquiry than others (Kourany, 2008), even when they differ from those of certain stakeholders. Critical approaches, for example, argue that social scientists should challenge dominant power structures to produce knowledge that contributes to social justice for marginalized groups (Ghorashi et al., 2026). In the context of migration research, this could imply that universalist values take centre stage over particularist values. Taking a different approach, *coordinative demarcation strategies* argue that values in science should be coordinated by the scientific community, in collaboration with regulators and stakeholders (Elliott, 2013). For migration research, this entails that the balance between universalist and particularist values should align with some combination of the expectations, perceptions, and values of policymakers and citizens. Study 1 examined the extent to which this value coordination has been achieved.

The question of how values should be managed in science is closely related to the question of whether and how scientists should weigh in on policy debates. In his influential book 'The Honest Broker,' Roger Pielke (2007) distinguished four *policy advocacy roles* that scientists and experts can adopt. *Pure scientist*s focus exclusively on their research and stay out of policy discussions altogether, while *science arbiters* speak out on policy only to answer factual questions. Pielke argued that these two roles are appropriate when there is both low uncertainty about the facts and high agreement on values. Pielke labelled such situations 'tornado politics,' which he contrasted with instances of 'abortion politics' that are characterized by high epistemic uncertainty and low value agreement. In contexts of abortion politics, such as polarised migration debates, Pielke argued that scientists can choose to either limit or expand the options for policymakers. Specifically, they can limit the options by acting as *issue advocates* for a particular policy or expand them by taking the role of *honest brokers* and outlining the likely consequences of as many policy options as possible.
Pielke particularly advocated the role of honest broker, which empowers policymakers and citizens to choose an evidence-based policy that best aligns with their values and priorities. He also argued, however, that the role of issue advocate is acceptable, as long as scientists are transparent about their own values. This position is echoed in the philosophical literature on values and science (Carrier, 2022; Douglas, 2008). Such value-transparent issue advocates can be labelled as *value advocates*. In contrast, scientists who fail to provide value-transparency can be understood as *epistocrats* who present a single 'best' course of action based on 'the evidence' (Post & Bienzeisler, 2024). Pielke argued that such

epistocrats, either willingly or unwillingly, often become *stealth advocates* in practice, advancing their own opinions while still presenting themselves as neutral experts. Study 1 examined how desirable researchers, policymakers, and citizens consider these six roles in migration research, as well as how common they believe each role is in practice.

Aside from these normative considerations, there is also the empirical question of how different advocacy roles affect researchers' credibility in policy debates. Little is currently known about this question, particularly in the polarised context of migration research. For other policy domains, an experimental study found that citizens trust scientists more when they act as honest brokers rather than epistocrats (Post & Bienzeisler, 2024). Although this study did not distinguish between epistocrats and value advocates, another experiment showed that scientists are, paradoxically, trusted less when they are transparent about their values (Elliott et al., 2017). Study 2 provides an experimental examination of four policy advocacy roles – science arbiter, honest broker, epistocrat, and value advocate – and their effectiveness in the exceptionally polarised debate on border controls.

3.2 Methodology study 1

Study 1 used data from the same survey outlined in Chapter 2.2. Specifically, the sample consisted of the same 100 migration researchers and 44 migration policymakers, as well as a randomly selected subsample of 3,599 European citizens who participated in the previously discussed study. Respondents were first presented with a short description of migration research. The value items were then introduced with a short explanation of the debate over the value-free ideal: *'There are some people who think migration researchers should only care about uncovering the facts about immigration. There are other people who think they should also care about other things, for example when they decide what they study, how they interpret their findings, and how they communicate their insights. We would like to know how you think migration researchers should act and how they act in practice.'* The first question was about respondents' position in this debate: '*Do you think migration researchers should care only about the facts, or should they also care about the political and societal implications of their findings?*' This question on respondents' *ideals* was followed by a question on their perceptions, namely what they think migration researchers care about in practice. Respondents answered both questions on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (Only care about facts) to 5 (Also care about implications).

Similar questions were then asked about the specific role of two universalist values – avoiding discrimination of immigrants and the safety of refugees – and two

particularist values – the cultural identity of European countries and housing and social services for native citizens. Specifically, respondents indicated how much they believe migration researchers ideally should, and in practice do, care about these four values on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (Not care at all) to 5 (Care a lot). Citizens were furthermore asked to what extent they personally care about each value, while policymakers and researchers were instead asked, respectively, to what extent it guides policymaking and their own research. After answering these questions on values in migration research, respondents were presented with a short description of six policy advocacy roles: pure scientist, science arbiter, honest broker, epistocrat, value advocate, and stealth advocate. For each role, respondents answered how often they think migration researchers should act as described – and how often they act this way in practice – on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very often).

3.3 Results study 1

The balance between particularist and universalist values was examined by subtracting respondents' mean score on the two particularist values from their mean score on the two universalist values. The resulting scale ranged from -4 (Particularist values) to 0 (Balanced value set) to 4 (Universalist values). Researchers clearly prioritized universalist values over particularist values in both their ideals for the field (1.5) and their own research (1.6). Their perception of values in the field also tilted clearly towards universalism (0.8), but less so. Policymakers' ideals for values in migration research were quite similar to those of researchers (1.0), although their emphasis on universalist values was less outspoken. Policymakers also indicated, however, that particularist values outweigh universalist values in policymaking (-0.3). Policymakers' perception of the value balance in migration research (0.8) was very similar to both what they think it should be and researchers' perception. Citizens on average expressed a very balanced value set, with only a slight emphasis on particularism in both their ideals for migration research (-0.1) and their own values (-0.1). Like researchers and policymakers, citizens also perceived the current value balance in migration research as tilting towards universalism (0.3).

The normative implications of these findings depend on the chosen value demarcation strategy. Within the framework of axiological strategies, it has been suggested that universalist values are inherently more appropriate for migration research than particularist values. From this perspective, the universalist emphasis that researchers attributed to their own research is reassuring, while a more concerning finding is perhaps that migration researchers believe their field does not yet emphasize universalist values enough. Drawing from coordinative demarcation strategies, however, it can be viewed as problematic that the predominantly universalist values that guide migration research are somewhat

misaligned with both the particularist emphasis in policymaking and the balanced value set of the public. Indeed, the gap between ideal and perceived values in migration research was clearly associated with lower levels of trust in the field among both policymakers (r = -0.30) and citizens (r = -0.25). Nonetheless, it is also reassuring from the normative perspective of coordinative demarcation strategies that policymakers and (to a lesser extent) citizens are at least aware of the predominantly universalist values in migration research.

Moving to the policy advocacy roles, the more disengaged roles of pure scientist and science arbiter are generally viewed as undesirable by both researchers (2.2, 2.3) and policymakers (2.9, 2.4). There is some concern that these roles are chosen too often in practice among researchers (3.0, 3.1), but not among policymakers (2.8, 2.7). Citizens, on the other hand, support these roles somewhat more (3.6, 3.2). Neither of the three groups believes the roles of pure scientist and science arbiter are chosen particularly often in practice (±2.9). Echoing Pielke's argument, the role of honest broker was deemed most desirable by the surveyed[1] policymakers (4.5), while also receiving broad support from researchers (4.4) and citizens (3.6). Neither of the three groups, however, believes this role is chosen as often as it should be in practice (±3.1).

Somewhat surprisingly, the role of epistocrat was considered most desirable by the surveyed[1] researchers (4.4), while also being viewed favourably by policymakers (4.4) and citizens (3.6). This finding is concerning in light of Pielke's argument that, in politicized domains, epistocrats risk acting as stealth advocates in practice. Once again, however, neither of the three surveyed groups believes the role of epistocrat is chosen very often in practice (±3.1). For the role of value advocate, researchers and citizens did not take a very strong position about either its desirability (both 3.0, 3.0) or how often it is chosen in practice (3.0, 3.1). Policymakers, however, view the role of value advocate as rather undesirable (2.5) and believe it is chosen too often (3.3). This lack of support for value-transparency is surprising in light of the normative literature, but in line with previous empirical findings (Elliott et al., 2017). Unsurprisingly, the role of stealth advocate was viewed unfavourably by both researchers (2.6) and policymakers (2.5). More concerning, however, is that both the surveyed[1] researchers (3.1) and policymakers (3.4) believe it is the most common out of all six roles in practice. According to Pielke, these concerns about stealth advocacy could tentatively be an unintended consequence of the broad endorsement of the epistocrat role. Citizens did not take a clear position on either the desirability of stealth advocacy (3.1) or how often it is exercised in practice (3.0).

3.4 Methodology study 2

To examine the effectiveness of each policy advocacy role, a survey experiment was conducted among 2,450 British citizens. Participants were quota sampled from an existing panel to obtain a nationally representative sample in terms of age, gender, and vote choice. All respondents first participated in a pre-test wave to assess their baseline scores on the outcome variables: trust in migration research, trust in evidence from migration research, and policy attitudes towards border controls. One week later, the same participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. In each condition, participants were presented with a newspaper article about a fictitious 'full professor of migration studies' who explains that *"Evidence from migration research suggests that stricter border controls are not effective at substantially reducing migration overall, but that they instead redirect migration routes. Because migrants must choose more dangerous routes, stricter border controls can increase risk of injury and death of migrants."*

In a science arbiter condition, the article stated explicitly that the migration researcher does not advocate any policy on border controls. In an honest broker condition, the migration researcher discussed two policy alternatives that align with different values and priorities: *"Governments that place greatest weight on deterrence and preventing any unauthorized entry may still support stricter border control. Governments that place greater weight on protecting lives and reducing dangerous journeys may instead favour alternatives such as safer legal pathways or faster asylum processing."* In an epistocrat condition, the migration researcher instead presented only a single course of action: "*The evidence is clear: the UK should move away from stricter border controls."* In a value advocate condition, the migration researcher advocated the same policy as in the epistocrat condition, while also disclosing that his position is partly rooted in values: *"Migration policy should be guided by humanitarian values, respect for human rights, and a commitment to saving lives rather than continuing policies that expose migrants to avoidable danger."* After reading the fictitious newspaper article, respondents completed a post-test containing the same questions as the pre-test.

3.5 Results study 2

The results clearly echoed those of the study discussed in Chapter 2. Participants overall expressed high levels of trust in migration researchers (5.2 on a 7-point scale) and the communicated insight about border controls (5.1 on a 7-point scale). Participants also changed their policy attitudes after being presented with this insight, as indicated by lower levels of support for border controls in the post-test compared to the pre-test a week earlier. Again, this finding points out that

migration researchers do, in fact, have some ability to change people's minds on migration policy.

The chosen policy advocacy role, however, determined whether migration research faced a backlash among participants whose opinions were challenged. Participants who identified as left-wing responded to all four policy advocacy roles with (almost) equal levels of trust. Right-wing citizens, however, expressed higher levels of trust in the migration researcher and his evidence in the science arbiter and honest broker condition, where he did not advocate a specific policy. In the epistocrat and value advocate conditions, right-wing participants expressed lower levels of trust in the migration researcher and his evidence – not only compared to the other two conditions but also compared to their own general trust in migration research in the pre-test. Like the study in Chapter 2, this finding demonstrates that informing citizens with belief-challenging insights can come at a price for public trust in migration research. This backlash effect, however, can be avoided when researchers choose a role that does not advance any particular policy.

3.6 Conclusion: Studies 1 and 2

Taken together, the findings of studies 1 and 2 present a complex picture regarding which of the six policy advocacy roles migration researchers should choose. The roles of pure scientist, science arbiter, and particularly stealth advocate are generally viewed as undesirable by both policymakers and researchers. The role of epistocrat was viewed more favourably, but it may come with a risk of unintentional stealth advocacy and it did not effectively preserve public trust. Acting as a value advocate, on the other hand, is normatively defensible but this role did not preserve trust either and it lacks support among policymakers. The role of honest broker, then, is perhaps easiest to recommend given that it is simultaneously normatively defensible, broadly supported, and effective in practice. Nonetheless, it should be emphasized that different researchers can and should choose different roles, depending on the issue, the context, and their own preference. Moreover, the role of honest broker does not, by itself, provide a solution to the previously discussed question of how values should be managed in knowledge production (Gluckman et al., 2021). This research therefore aims to contribute to a more nuanced discussion about values and policy advocacy roles in migration research, and how they can be coordinated in synergy with policymakers and citizens.

Key findings. Values and policy advocacy roles in migration research

• The debate should move beyond the simplistic binary of 'objective' versus 'biased' research, towards a nuanced discussion about values in migration research and how they can be coordinated in synergy with policymakers and citizens.

• Migration research is guided more by universalist than by particularist values. Depending on the chosen normative perspective, this may or may not call for efforts to better align the field with the particularist emphasis in policymaking and the balanced value set of the public.

• Migration researchers and policymakers share a concern over stealth advocacy, which occurs when researchers advance their own opinions while still presenting themselves as neutral experts. Both groups deem this role undesirable and both believe it to be rather common in practice.

• Drawing from the work of Roger Pielke, the concerns about stealth advocacy could tentatively be an unintended consequence of the broad endorsement of the epistemocrat role, in which researchers advocate a single 'best' policy based on 'the evidence.'

• Public outreach can come at a price for trust in migration research among citizens whose opinions are challenged. This backlash effect, however, can be avoided when researchers do not advocate any particular policy.

• Migration researchers can and should choose different policy advocacy roles, depending on the issue, the context, and their own preference. Based on the findings, however, the role of honest broker, in which researchers outline the likely consequences of as many policy options as possible, is perhaps easiest to recommend given that it is simultaneously normatively defensible, broadly supported, and effective in practice.

4. How Migration Narratives Move People: Emotion, Identity, Solidarity, and Computational Analysis

Note. This chapter provides a summary of the following academic articles and were presented in over view at IMISCO 2026 (How Migration Narratives Move People: Emotion, Identity, Solidarity, and Computational Analysis on the panel Innovating to enhance dialogues on migration policies and practices) and as a panel at ISPP 2026 (From Psychophysiology to Institutional Narratives: A Multimethod Examination of European Migration Politics):

- *Stephens, L., Llewellyn, C., Rogers, L., Kyritsopoulos, C., Long, F., Prangere, A., Snyder, P., & Cram, L. (2026, May). Can Large Language Models Facilitate Qualitative Political Narrative Analysis?. In Proceedings of the 3rd Workshop on Natural Language Processing for Political Sciences (PoliticalNLP 2026) (pp. 261-271).*
- *Long, Feiteng; Cram, Laura; Llewellyn, Clare; Kyritsopoulos, Constantine; Snyder, Peyton; Stephens, Luke; Moore, Adam (2026) Narrative Framing, Core-Belief (Mis)Match, and Psychophysiological Responses to Migration Narratives . Manuscript under review.*
- *Stephens, L., Llewellyn, C., Rogers, L., Kyritsopoulos, C., Long, F., Prangere, A., Snyder, P., & Cram, L. (2026) Human-LLM co-analysis of the (re)construction of solidarity as a foundational institutional narrative of the European Union. Manuscript under review.*
- *Stephens, L., Llewellyn, C., Rogers, L., Kyritsopoulos, C., Long, F., Prangere, A., Snyder, P., & Cram, L. (2026)Narrating Migration, Narrating Europe: Migration Narratives in the State of the European Union using a Human–LLM Co-Analysis Manuscript in preparation*
- *Kyritsopoulos, Constantine; Long, Feiteng; Cram, Laura; Llewellyn, Clare; Snyder, Peyton; Stephens, Luke; Moore, Adam (2026) Moral Contest: The Causal Impact of Asylum Frames on European Solidarity. Manuscript in preparation.*
- *Snyder, Peyton; Kyritsopoulos, Constantine; Long, Feiteng; Cram, Laura; Llewellyn, Clare; Stephens, Luke; Moore, Adam (2026) Lost and Alone; exclusion, radicalization, and message clarity. Manuscript in preparation.*

There is ongoing uncertainty on how migration policy narratives emerge, are communicated, and are received by the public. This has profound implications for our capacity to find common ground and a sense of solidarity across a diverse continent. To understand how messages about migration are perceived by others and how these messages resonate with and influence others we need to understand the impact of the message through their effects on peoples' biases,

and values. We are examining EU migration narratives and their effects from multiple perspectives.

Opinions on migration are shaped not only by policy design or demographic change but also by narratives: the stories through which migration is framed as threat or opportunity, humanitarian obligation or security challenge, and through which belonging, responsibility, and legitimate political response are made meaningful. These narratives do not simply describe migration, they shape how citizens feel about migrants, how they evaluate those who speak about migration, what forms of solidarity they support, and whether they are drawn toward moderate or more extreme forms of political mobilisation.

This paper brings together four complementary studies at the intersection of political psychology, migration research, and computational social science to examine how migration narratives operate across multiple levels of political life. The studies combine multi-country survey experiments, psychophysiological measures, online exclusion experiments, and Human–LLM co-analysis of elite political speeches. Taken together, they investigate what we describe as the mind–brain–action nexus of migration politics: how migration narratives are embedded in institutional discourse, how they are processed emotionally and physiologically by audiences, and how morally resonant framing can strengthen or weaken support for migration policy.

Across the four studies, a common pattern emerges. Migration narratives have substantial effects, but those effects are not uniform. Responses depend on how migration is framed, whether narratives resonate with recipients' prior and moral beliefs, whether they offer meaningful action, and how they intersect with territorial identities such as national and European identification. Computational tools can help identify and track these narratives across large corpora, though they remain limited in interpreting ambiguity, context, and political nuance. We argue that migration narratives should be understood as central mechanisms through which migration is emotionally experienced, morally contested, and politically mobilised.

In this paper we show how migration narratives affect emotion, mobilisation, solidarity, identity, and discourse over time. We connect migration studies with political psychology and narrative analysis. EU politics and public responses to it can be studied through interdisciplinary methods that connect cognition, affect, identity, and behaviour. Political communication, including migration discourse, should be studied not only through self-reported attitudes but also through embodied and physiological responses.

The four studies speak to different but connected dimensions of migration politics. The first examines how positive and negative migration narratives shape affective and psychophysiological engagement, and whether those effects depend on the fit between the narrative and recipients' pre-existing beliefs. The second investigates whether social exclusion increases openness to moderate and radical migration-related activist groups, and how this depends on psychological predispositions, action clarity, and supranational identity. The third analyses how migration is narrated in the European Commission's annual State of the European Union addresses and assesses the extent to which large language models can support the interpretive analysis of migration narratives over time. The fourth examines whether asylum solidarity can be strengthened by tailoring message frames to the moral values of different audiences, while situating these framing effects within the broader architecture of territorial identity.

The details of the studies are: 1) A perceived threat: a multi-country online experiment, investigating if framing migration as a threat reduces positive emotions and increases negative emotions, heightening negative attitudes toward narrators and migrants. We consider if a belief–mismatch effect emerges when narrative framing conflicts with individuals' core beliefs. 2) Exclusion and action clarity: a multi-country online cyberball experiment. Those who experience social exclusion are more likely to show greater interest and engage with extreme groups. We investigate the characteristics that make radical pro and anti-migration group narratives appealing, including the role of action clarity in uncertainty reduction. 3) LLM-assisted narrative analysis: comparing human-coded analyses of EU State of the Union with 4 LLMs on narrative coherence, thematic framing, and causal emplotment. LLMs approximate human baselines on surface features yet struggle with contextual nuance and ambiguity. Proposing framework to integrate LLMs into interpretive social science and scale longitudinal analysis of migration framing. 4) Moral misalignment and EU solidarity: a multi-country survey and framing experiment. Supranational identity aligns with individualising moral values, while state identity aligns with binding values. Citizens with strong binding values, policy support increases under either value-congruent "binding" frames or the EU's typical "individualising" frame, indicating tailored moral framing can strengthen solidarity. In each of the participant studies we sample across four European countries Italy, Germany, Denmark and Poland, studies 1) and 2) also considered the UK. Participation was voluntary, and participants were provided with monetary compensation for their time.

Rather than treating these as separate strands, we hope this paper reads as evidence for a broader claim: migration narratives operate simultaneously as institutional storylines, emotional cues, moral claims, and invitations to collective action. Understanding their power requires connecting discourse analysis with audience psychology and experimental research.

4.1 Literature

Migration is shaped not only by policy choices or population pressures but by the narratives through which migration is made meaningful. Research in migration studies has shown that these narratives do not just describe migration politics they help to shape migration politics, and who is seen as deserving or threatening, they are used in policy debates and policy making, influencing which policy responses gain support (Wodak 2015; Triandafyllidou 2018; Boswell et al 2011). In EU politics, there is a tension between mobility and migration (Geddes et al. 2020), which can be narrated as crisis, control, and security (de Witte et al. 2016) or through a humanitarian narrative, especially during moments of displacement, which produces a wider EU migration discourse that focuses on openness, solidarity, and order (Tickin 2011).

Migration framing shapes public attitudes and emotions, threat-based portrayals of migrants heighten prejudice, anxiety, and exclusionary attitudes, while opportunity framings can improve evaluations of migrants and migration-related policies (Riek et al 2006; Brader et al. 2008; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Esses 2021). These narratives can envoke fear, compassion, or hostility to migrants and to those who speak about them (Ahmed 2004; Nussbaum 2013). How the framing works depend on the audience as well as the message. Motivated reasoning and belief congruence suggests that people respond more favourably to narratives that align with their prior beliefs and identities (Festinger 1962; Kunda 1990; Taber and Lodge 2006). Research on uncertainty, exclusion, and radicalisation shows that political narratives may become appealing when they offer belonging, certainty, and meaningful action under conditions of grievance or identity threat (Hogg et al. 2007; Webber et al. 2018; Pfundmair and Mahr 2023).

These questions are important in the European context, where attitudes toward migration and asylum are strongly influenced by territorial identity. Support for European solidarity depends less on material interest than on identification with political community (Risse 2014). Citizens who identify more strongly with Europe tend to support cross-border solidarity, while more exclusively national identification is associated with greater scepticism toward such obligations (Kuhn, Solaz and van Elsas 2018). Moral psychology suggests that migration attitudes are also shaped by moral values. Moral Foundations Theory distinguishes between individualising values such as care and fairness and binding values such as loyalty, authority, and purity, and research on moral reframing shows that political arguments can sometimes be made more persuasive when expressed in the moral vocabulary of the audience (Graham, Haidt and Nosek 2009; Feinberg and Willer 2015). Moral values impact EU identity, in migration politics, this helps explain why universal humanitarian appeals may resonate strongly with some audiences but not others, and why asylum solidarity is often constrained by both

identity and moral mismatch (Kyritsopoulos et al 2026). Computational methods are increasingly being used to trace political narratives across larger corpora, although interpretive scholars warn that automation remains limited in capturing context and ambiguity (Nelson 2020; Grimmer, et al. 2022, Rocca et al 2024).

Migration narratives are multi-level political mechanisms: they are embedded in institutional discourse, processed through emotion, identity, and morality, and translated into attitudes toward migrants, solidarity, and collective action. Recent work in political neuroscience, social neuroscience, and computational social science has shown the value of combining behavioural measures with physiological indicators and computational analysis to study political judgement, intergroup response, and public discourse (Lazer et al. 2009; Oxley et al. 2008; Hibbing et al 2023; Cikara and Van Bavel 2014; Schreiber 2017). Advances in text analysis and large language models (LLMs) have expanded the capacity to analyse political narratives across larger corpora (Nelson 2020; Gilardi, et al 2023). This paper combines experimental political psychology, psychophysiological indicators of engagement, and Human–LLM narrative analysis to examine how migration narratives operate across institutional discourse, emotional response, and support for solidarity. Research combining political psychology with psychophysiological measurement, and work linking computational text analysis to social and political behaviour, has expanded in recent years, studies integrating these approaches within a single framework remain relatively rare, particularly in migration research. Our approach builds on these works by combining experimental political psychology, biometric indicators of engagement, and computational narrative analysis to examine migration discourse across institutional and audience levels.

4.2 Study 1: Narrative Framing, Emotion, and Embodied Engagement

The first study comprised two complementary experiments examining how migration narratives shape emotional, attitudinal, and physiological responses. In both experiments, participants were exposed to migration narratives varying in evaluative framing, contrasting positive/opportunity-focused and negative/threat-focused accounts

4.2.1 Methods

The first experiment was a multi-country online survey experiment conducted in Germany, Denmark, the UK, Italy, and Poland, recruited through Prolific Academic and Bilendi. Participants were adults, born, living and held nationality in the country and self-identified as non-migrants. The total number of 2,375 participants.

Participants were randomly assigned a narrative text which they responded to by writing about their feelings towards the narrative. After reading the narrative stimuli, respondents reported their levels of anxiety and excitement, as well as their attitudes toward the narrator and toward migrants. Political orientation was measured as an indicator of core beliefs, allowing tests of whether responses varied according to belief congruence with the frame.

In the second experiment extended this design in a laboratory setting with 59 participants. Participants were exposed to the same broad framing manipulation, but in addition to self-report measures, the study collected psychophysiological indicators of arousal and engagement, including skin conductance level, heart rate, and pupil dilation. This study included seven who identified as migrants as to maximise statistical power (it is much harder to recruit for in person studies).

Across the two experiments, the design enabled comparison of framing effects across countries and methods, while also distinguishing between the emotional valence of narrative response and the intensity of physiological engagement.

4.2.2 Results

A first key finding across the project is that how migration is framed has important consequences for how narratives are emotionally and physiologically experienced, the details of this work are available in the paper Long et al. (to be published). In the framing studies, positive or opportunity-focused migration narratives consistently produced more constructive self-reported responses than negative or threat-focused narratives. Participants exposed to positive framing reported lower anxiety, greater excitement, more favourable evaluations of the narrator, and warmer attitudes toward migrants. By contrast, threat-focused framing reduced positive responses and strengthened negative orientations toward both the messenger and the migrant target.

These results confirm that migration narratives shape attitudes not only through propositional content, but through affective pathways. Narratives that cast migration as danger or burden do not merely communicate a particular policy preference; they activate a more negative emotional climate around both migrants and those who advocate on their behalf. Opportunity-focused narratives, by contrast, make more constructive forms of evaluation available by cueing contribution, possibility, and openness rather than hostility or fear.

The studies also show that narrative effects cannot be explained by framing alone. Responses depended in part on whether the narrative aligned with recipients' pre-

existing political orientations. When narrative framing matched participants' core beliefs, they reported lower anxiety, higher excitement, and more positive evaluations of the narrator. This belief-match effect suggests that the reception of migration narratives is shaped not only by message content, but by the fit between the message and the audience's prior worldview.

The psychophysiological data complicate this pattern. Contrary to a simple expectation that belief-congruent narratives would reduce stress, congruent narratives were associated with greater physiological activation across measures such as skin conductance, heart rate, and pupil dilation. This suggests that narrative resonance may increase attentional engagement and mobilisation rather than simply reduce discomfort. In other words, the effect of a migration narrative cannot be captured by a simple positive/negative distinction. Narratives vary not only in valence, but in the intensity of the engagement they generate. A resonant narrative may feel more positive while also producing greater embodied activation.

This distinction between emotional valence and engagement intensity suggests that persuasive or resonant narratives do not simply calm or reassure audiences; they can also energise them. That insight helps connect the framing study to the wider project, particularly to questions of mobilisation and solidarity.

4.3 Study 2: Exclusion, Uncertainty, and the Appeal of Collective Action

The second study considers a different but related question: under what conditions do migration-related activist groups become appealing, and to whom. Drawing on research linking social exclusion and identity uncertainty to radicalisation, the study tested whether exclusion would increase approach toward moderate and radical immigration activist groups.

4.3.1 Methods

The study employed a mixed experimental design using the Cyberball paradigm. Participants were recruited online through Prolific Academic and Bilendi across five countries: England, Italy, Germany, Denmark, and Poland, a total of 1,966. Participants were told that they were taking part in a study about online relationships and social interaction. They completed demographic questions and a battery of individual-difference measures. They were then randomly assigned to one of the inclusion or exclusion and clear or ambiguous action conditions. The exclusion manipulation was delivered using Cyberball, a

widely used virtual ball-tossing task designed to induce feelings of social inclusion or ostracism. Following the Cyberball task, participants were shown two activist group manifestos, one representing a moderate immigration reform group and one representing a radical immigration reform group. The order of presentation was randomised.

The participants evaluated both the moderate and radical groups. This was intended to distinguish between two possibilities often left unresolved in prior research: whether exclusion increases attraction to extreme groups specifically, or whether excluded individuals become more interested in group belonging more generally, regardless of ideological extremity.

4.3.2 Results

Participants from five European countries completed an online Cyberball exclusion manipulation before evaluating both moderate and radical groups whose action plans varied in clarity, the details of this work are available in the paper Snyder et al. (to be published).

The most immediate finding was that participants generally preferred moderate over radical groups. This baseline confirms that radical groups are not equally attractive in the abstract and that any account of radical appeal must explain variation around an underlying preference for moderation. Contrary to expectations, however, social exclusion itself did not produce a robust direct effect on willingness to approach either group. This null result suggests that exclusion alone may be insufficient to increase attraction to extreme groups, at least in online settings, and cautions against overly simple models in which ostracism automatically generates radicalisation.

The conditional effects revealed that a tendency for interpersonal victimhood emerged as a credible predictor of group approach, especially toward radical groups. Participants who were more likely to interpret interpersonal life through the lens of grievance, moral injury, and recognition-seeking were more attracted to activist groups overall, but disproportionately so to the radical group. This finding suggests that radical group narratives may resonate especially strongly with individuals whose sense of self is already organised around perceived victimhood and moral antagonism.

Rejection sensitivity showed a different pattern. Rather than pushing participants directly toward radical groups, higher rejection sensitivity reduced attraction to moderate groups while leaving radical group appeal relatively unchanged. This suggests that for some individuals, the pathway to extremist appeal may be less a

direct movement toward radicalism than a withdrawal from moderate forms of collective belonging.

Stronger EU identification was associated with greater preference for the moderate over the radical group, suggesting that supranational identity can function as a protective factor against extreme migration-related mobilisation. This resonates strongly with the solidarity findings discussed later and highlights the central role of European identification across different outcomes in migration politics.

Action clarity did not have a simple main effect, it interacted with need for cognitive closure and EU identification in ways that suggest narratives matter not only because of their ideological content, but because of how they specify what action is possible or required. Migration-related group narratives therefore function as action scripts as much as they do as moral or ideological claims. Under conditions of uncertainty, who a narrative appeals to may depend on whether it offers ambiguity that allows projection or clarity that reduces uncertainty.

Taken together, these findings suggest that openness to radical or moderate migration-related groups is not driven straightforwardly by exclusion alone. Rather, the appeal of collective action depends on the interaction between narrative structure, grievance-related predispositions, and identity. Migration narratives do not simply shape policy attitudes; they can also shape who sees certain forms of collective mobilisation as meaningful or attractive.

4.4 Study 3: Institutional EU Narratives

The third study analysed migration narratives in the State of the European Union addresses delivered between 2010 and 2023, spanning the presidencies of Barroso, Juncker, and von der Leyen. The corpus was selected because it provides a recurring and institutionally consistent site in which the European Commission interprets major political developments and situates migration within broader accounts of Europe's identity, responsibilities, and future direction. The speeches covered major episodes including the Eurozone crisis, the 2015 refugee crisis, Brexit, Covid-19, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

4.4.1 Methods

The study employed a Human–LLM co-analysis. Two human researchers independently conducted qualitative narrative analyses of each address, focusing on how migration was framed, how actors and events were linked, and how the

EU positioned itself within wider storylines of mobility, solidarity, and control. In parallel, ChatGPT and Mistral were prompted using the same interpretive framework to analyse the same corpus. Human and model outputs were then compared to identify convergent narrative structures and areas where LLMs diverged from human interpretation. This design enabled both substantive analysis of shifts and continuities in EU migration discourse and methodological assessment of LLMs as tools for scaling interpretive narrative analysis. The approach identified three recurring narrative modes—mobility as value and opportunity, humanitarian responsibility, and security/political control—while also showing that LLMs were more reliable on broad thematic patterns than on ambiguity, context, and institutional nuance.

4.4.2 Results

If the first two studies focus on how audiences receive migration narratives, the third considers how those narratives are produced and sustained within elite political discourse. Analysing the State of the European Union addresses from 2010 to 2023. The details of this work are available in two papers Stephens et al (2026) and Stephens et al. (to be published).

The study identifies three recurring narrative modes through which migration is incorporated into the EU's annual self-presentation: European mobility as value and opportunity, migration as humanitarian responsibility, and migration as security and political control.

These narratives do not appear as discrete stages replacing one another over time. Rather, they coexist across the corpus and are reweighted in response to changing political contexts such as the Eurozone crisis, the 2015 refugee crisis, Brexit, Covid-19, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This longitudinal perspective reveals that migration is not narrated in a single stable way in EU institutional discourse. Instead, it is managed through a narrative architecture that allows the EU to hold together competing commitments to openness, solidarity, sovereignty, and order.

The mobility narrative presents intra-European movement, and selectively desirable external migration, as a positive expression of European integration, demographic renewal, and openness. It functions as a normative baseline in the speeches, associating mobility with value, opportunity, and the European project itself. Alongside this is a humanitarian narrative in which refugees and displaced people are framed as victims whose treatment tests Europe's moral identity. This narrative draws on Europe's own historical experiences of war and displacement to position solidarity as a moral and political obligation. A third narrative, increasingly prominent in the post-2015 period, casts irregular migration as a

matter of border management, security, and geopolitical instability. In later speeches, this develops into a narrative of migration instrumentalisation by hostile actors such as Belarus and Russia.

What emerges is not a simple shift from openness to securitisation, but a more complex coexistence of narrative modes. The EU does not abandon humanitarian language when security concerns rise, nor does it entirely withdraw from openness when control becomes more salient. Instead, these narratives are used together, often in tension, to preserve a sense of institutional coherence in a politically divisive field. Migration and solidarity becomes one of the main arenas in which the EU narrates its own identity and manages unresolved tensions between inclusion and exclusion.

Methodologically, this study also contributes to debates about the role of computational tools in interpretive social science. Using a Human–LLM co-analysis approach, the research compared two human analysts' readings of the speeches with outputs generated by large language models using the same narrative framework. The results suggest that LLMs can approximate human analysis on broad thematic patterns, narrative coherence, and some forms of causal emplotment. However, they were less reliable in capturing contextual nuance, ambiguity, and the political significance of shifts across crises and presidencies. This indicates that LLMs can support the scaling of narrative analysis across longitudinal corpora, but only when embedded within an interpretive framework guided by human judgement.

For the wider perspective, the importance of this study lies in showing that migration narratives are not merely stimuli used in experiments. They are recurrent features of institutional discourse that shape the broader environments within which citizens encounter migration as a political issue.

4.5 *Study 4: Moral Framing, Territorial Identity, and Migration Solidarity*

The fourth study considers the politics of asylum solidarity and asks whether moral framing can increase support for EU burden-sharing. Building on work linking supranational identity to solidarity and binding versus individualising moral values to different political orientations, the study tested whether pro- and anti-migration frames would be more persuasive when matched to recipients' moral profiles. The details of this work are available in the paper Kyritsopoulos et al. (to be published).

4.5.1 Methods

Study 4 used a pre-registered, five-condition survey experiment to examine how moral framing shaped support for EU asylum solidarity. The study was fielded in four EU member states—Denmark, Germany, Italy, and Poland—with a total sample of approximately 4,100 respondents. Participants were randomly assigned to one of five conditions: a pro-asylum individualising frame, a pro-asylum binding frame, an anti-asylum individualising frame, an anti-asylum binding frame, or a control condition. This design allowed the study to test not only whether framing affected asylum attitudes, but whether frame effectiveness depended on the match between the moral language of the message and respondents' pre-existing moral orientations.

In addition to the experimental manipulation, the study measured territorial identity and moral foundations in order to test whether support for asylum solidarity was structured primarily by supranational versus state identification, by individualising versus binding values, or by the interaction between values and frames. Outcome measures covered several dimensions, including policy support, willingness to accept burden-sharing or make sacrifices, trust in the EU and in fellow Europeans, warmth toward migrants and narrators, and emotional responses to the appeals. The analysis used a Bayesian approach, informed by priors derived from earlier cross-national mapping work on identity and moral values, to assess both the main effects of identity and morality and the extent to which morally congruent framing increased or weakened support for asylum solidarity.

4.5.2 Results

The clearest result is that territorial identity is the dominant predictor of asylum-relevant attitudes. Across outcomes, supranational identification was associated with stronger support for solidarity, while state-centred identification predicted lower support. The effect of identity was substantially larger than that of moral foundations or framing manipulations. This finding matters because it situates framing effects within a broader attitudinal architecture: moral appeals do not operate on a blank slate, but within a political field already structured by deeply rooted senses of territorial belonging.

At the same time, moral values did matter, though in different ways. Individuals higher in individualising values were generally more supportive of asylum solidarity and warmer toward migrants, while binding values predicted resistance to costly asylum commitments. Yet the relationship was not entirely straightforward: binding values were also associated with more positive

evaluations of the EU as an institutional order, suggesting that moral foundations can operate differently across policy, institutional, and affective domains.

A possible implementation of this work in communicative strategy is the finding that moral congruence can increase frame effectiveness. Among citizens high in binding values, support for solidarity could be strengthened by binding-framed pro-asylum appeals. This is a notable result because much EU rhetoric tends to rely on universalist or individualising vocabularies of care, fairness, and humanitarian duty. The study suggests that solidaristic messages need not be communicated only in those terms. Appeals grounded in loyalty, duty, responsibility, or collective order can also support solidaristic outcomes when addressed to audiences whose moral profiles make such appeals resonant.

However, the study also demonstrates that moral tailoring is not cost-free. Some binding-framed pro-asylum messages generated negative reactions among more individualising audiences, producing a cross-audience backfire effect. Likewise, anti-asylum frames could have affective and political effects that depended on whether the frame's moral vocabulary matched or attacked the audience's values. The broader implication is that there is no single universally persuasive moral language for asylum solidarity. Effective communication in this domain is likely to require segmented or plural strategies rather than a one-size-fits-all frame.

This finding has important implications when read together with the SOTEU analysis. If EU institutional rhetoric disproportionately draws on individualising moral language, it may systematically underserve or fail to resonate with binding-oriented citizens. The problem of asylum solidarity, then, is not only one of political will or distributional conflict, but also one of moral communication.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Innovations in political psychology and data science can improve how research evidence is communicated to audiences and help assess impact. This paper brings together methodological strands and research on migration narratives, political psychology, and computational methods, to investigate how narratives shape emotions, attitudes, identification, and action. We describe how combining insights from survey experiments, biometric measures, and social computational methods allow us to investigate the mind–brain–action nexus in political and policy contexts. We have found that identity structures the terrain, and framing can shape outcomes, but only conditionally and with trade-offs. Specifically, we find that Migration narratives work through both framing and audience predispositions: threat-focused narratives generate more negative affect and attitudes, but belief-congruent narratives can also intensify engagement, showing that resonance is not simply about agreement but about mobilisation. The appeal of extreme migration-related groups is not driven simply by exclusion alone; rather, exclusion interacts with individual psychological dispositions and group messaging, while identities such as EU identification may function as protective anchors against radical appeal. Migration narratives are embedded in broader institutional storylines through which the EU negotiates its political identity, and these narratives can be analysed at scale with LLMs, though only in partnership with human interpretation. Support for EU asylum solidarity is anchored primarily in territorial identity, but moral framing can still matter at the margins—especially when messages are aligned with audiences' moral profiles, though such tailoring may also alienate non-target audiences. EU migration narratives are not only politically contested in content, but also unevenly resonant because their dominant moral vocabularies are better aligned with some citizens than others.

Taken together, the four studies suggest that migration narratives should be understood as part of the political infrastructure through which migration is made meaningful. They operate at multiple levels at once. At the institutional level, they organise how migration is narrated as mobility, humanitarian obligation, or security concern. At the psychological level, they shape emotional response, evaluative judgement, and embodied activation. At the level of mobilisation, they influence whether groups and action scripts become attractive, especially under conditions of uncertainty and grievance. At the policy level, they shape support for solidarity in ways conditioned by identity and moral orientation.

A central conclusion across the studies is that the effects of migration narratives are conditional rather than universal. No narrative frame works in the same way for all audiences. Threat-focused and security-oriented narratives can intensify negative affect and exclusionary orientations, but their impact depends on

recipients' beliefs and predispositions. Positive or solidaristic narratives can improve attitudes and strengthen support, but often only when they resonate with the values and identities of their audiences. Similarly, exclusion does not mechanically produce radicalisation; group appeal depends on the interaction between narrative form, psychological vulnerability, and supranational identity.

This emphasis on conditionality is particularly important in a European context shaped by nested identities and competing political moralities. Across the project, European identification repeatedly emerges as a stabilising or solidaristic factor, associated both with greater support for solidarity and with lower attraction to radical migration-related groups. Yet the project also shows that the EU's own narrative repertoire is internally divided and not equally resonant across publics. The coexistence of mobility, solidarity, and security narratives in elite discourse reflects genuine political tensions within the European project, but it also creates uneven possibilities for identification and persuasion.

Methodologically, the paper demonstrates the value of integrating political psychology, experiments, and interpretive-computational analysis. Survey and laboratory methods are useful for identifying how narratives affect citizens' emotions, attitudes, and behavioural dispositions. Longitudinal narrative analysis is necessary for understanding the broader discursive structures within which such responses are elicited. Computational tools such as LLMs can help extend this work across time and large corpora, but only when coupled with theoretically informed human interpretation.

Migration narratives matter because they shape more than attitudes toward migrants. They shape how migration is emotionally experienced, morally evaluated, and politically acted upon. They influence who citizens trust, how they interpret solidarity, whether they are receptive to moderate or radical mobilisation, and how institutions like the EU narrate their own identity through migration.

The four studies brought together here show that migration narratives work through a layered nexus of emotion, identity, morality, and action. Their effects depend on framing, audience predispositions, and context. This has two broad implications. For research, it highlights the need for migration studies to combine experimental, interpretive, and computational approaches rather than treating discourse, attitudes, and behaviour as separate domains. For practice, it suggests that public communication about cannot rely on a universal frame. Effective communication must recognise that audiences differ in their identities, moral values, and sensitivities to threat, belonging, and solidarity.

Key findings. How Migration Narratives Move People

• Migration narratives do not act universally. They shape politics through interaction between message, audience, and context. Migration narrative effects are conditional.
• Framing matters, threat narratives intensify negative affect, positive narratives can improve evaluations.
• Audience predispositions matter too, prior beliefs, grievance sensitivity, moral values, and territorial identity.
• EU identification repeatedly acts as a protective anchor, stronger solidarity and a lower attraction to radical mobilisation.
• Institutional narratives are politically mixed, not equally resonant across publics. LLMs help scale analysis but interpretation still requires human judgement
• Migration narratives shape more than attitudes toward migrants, they influence: emotion, embodied engagement, solidarity, collective action, institutional identity
• Effective communication cannot rely on one universal frame. Future research should combine: experimental methods, political psychology, physiological measures, computational and interpretive analysis
• Migration politics is not only about policy design. It is also about which stories resonate, with whom, and under what conditions.

Endnotes

1 The addition of ‘surveyed’ here indicates that the difference with some other policy advocacy roles is not significant and hence cannot be generalized beyond the sample.

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Chapter 2 and 3

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