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'Push or pull'? Framing immigration in times of crisis in the European Union and the United States

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ABSTRACT

Migration has become a highly divisive, polarizing issue. This article contributes to the understanding of this polarization by looking at interpretations of migration during critical junctures. It explores discursive framings during the recent migration crises in the European Union and the United States. Analysing interview data collected between 2014 and 2018 with over 100 governance actors, it finds that similar interpretations emerge among the same type of actors' groups across both settings. This finding emphasizes the role of situated agency for framing processes. Frames in both cases establish a perspective of migration as a tragedy, and focus, depending on the type of governance actor, either on pull factors in countries of arrival or push factors in countries of origin as the main cause of immigration, leading to conflicting ideas as to how to respond to the crisis. These conflicting understandings, the article concludes, further fuel the existing socio-political divides.

KEYWORDS

Migration; crisis; European Union; United States; frames; politicization

1. Introduction

Immigration is among the most salient and divisive issues in Western democracies, and scholars are increasingly striving to understand this politicization (see Van der Brug et al. 2015, Grande et al 2019). This article contributes to this debate by looking at the framing of immigration in the context of crisis. It looks at how causes and effects of immigration have been understood, and communicated among governance actors during a critical period. Ways of (re)producing meaning about immigration are at the core of politicization processes. The divergence or convergence of actors' views on the issue, promoting consequently similar or contradictory policy solutions, can either fuel conflicts about immigration, i.e. it can increase the existing politicization of the field of immigration policy, or it can help to depoliticize it.

The politicization of immigration did not develop in a void. In the case of the European Union, immigration has been increasingly dealt with as a European Union concern, while at the same time Euroscepticism has been rising (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2018; Geddes, Hadj Abdou, and Brumat 2020). This questioning of the European project, as well as of immigration, however, is paradigmatic of a wider trend that stretches beyond Europe:

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namely a growing opposition to a post-national, globalized world, and growing demands to restore national sovereignty. The exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union (Brexit), and the 'Trump phenomenon' in the United States have become icons of this political trend, often labelled as 'sovereignism', i.e. the aspiration for the recovery of a (real or imaginary) past in which authority was contained within national boundaries (Basile and Mazzoleni 2020).

Social groups that benefit symbolically and materially from globalization and economic integration, and those that lose out are pitted against each other (Kriesi et al. 2012). This conflict has manifested itself ideologically in a contest of cosmopolitans versus communitarians (Strijbis, Helmer, and de Wilde 2018): those who are in favour of the opening of borders to flows of capital, services, goods, persons and international collaboration and those who prefer the closure of nation state borders, national sovereignty and independence. It comes as no surprise then that those social groups and parties that oppose European integration and those that oppose international migration overlap (Kriesi et al. 2012). Immigration and European integration are twin issues; they are the two core issues upon which the new political cleavage is articulated. Put differently, the expansion of 'the scope of conflict' (Grande, Schwarzbözl, and Fatke 2019) – on migration as well as on European integration – within a political system, i.e. the politicization of these two issues, is rooted in the same conflict, and the cleavage that emerged from this conflict.

If we want to fully understand the underlying dynamics of the politicization of European integration, processes of de-integration and rising sovereignist demands, we have to turn our attention to immigration. We need, moreover, to complement our study with analyses that stretch beyond the EU. If it is the globalization-cleavage that drives opposition to European integration, as research so far has emphasized, then an examination of other regions where in response to high levels of globalization this cleavage manifests itself is highly relevant, to put the developments in the EU into perspective. This contribution thus aims to turn the telescope by looking at immigration with a focus on the United States, as a comparator case to the European Union.

It discusses the 2015 migration crisis in the European Union and the 2014 migration crisis at the southern border of the United States. These two cases are chosen since they occurred during a similar time period, and both were about significantly rising numbers of arrivals of migrants from conflict zones seeking asylum. In both cases the crisis became apparent as a result of the lack of reception facilities, given the increasing numbers of people arriving. Both occurred in settings in which the globalization cleavage is highly relevant, and immigration has been highly politicized (Wong 2016; Grande, Schwarzbözl, and Fatke 2019).

In the EU in 2015 and 2016 over 1.2 million persons (2016: 1204300, 2015: 1.257.000 first time applicants) filed an asylum application, a number more than double of that of 2014 (627000) with persons from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq being the major asylum seeking groups (Eurostat 2017). In the U.S. the crisis unraveled during the summer of 2014 with increasing flows of asylum seekers, many of whom were unaccompanied minors from Central America. In 2014 in total about 121,200 asylum claims were filed in the country, which represented a 44% increase from the previous year (UNHCR 2015).

Crises such as those focused on in this contribution are widely considered as critical junctures. By inducing a rise in the salience of issues that touch upon different interests

and values held by a society, as immigration does, they can activate concerns and exacerbate conflicts between different groups in society, and can potentially pull those that are positioned in the middle of the conflict to one side or another (Ademmer and Stoehr 2019). Saliency, i.e. the growing visibility of an issue, however, is in itself not sufficient to expand conflicts and/or diverging viewpoints, as research (see Meltzer et al. 2017) has emphasized. It matters which perspectives are strengthened; which are downplayed or omitted in the public sphere and which cues are provided by elites (ibid.).

In light of this consideration, the question this article addresses is: How were these migration crises interpreted in these two parts of the world? What were the key understandings of what happened (of the causes and effects of immigration), and what courses of actions did these understandings generate?

The article takes an actor centred perspective, focusing on the frames of governance actors, defined as those that seek to make or shape policies in the field of migration. The frames of elite actors are not only important in terms of providing references for the wider debate, but they also constitute migration governance, by guiding policy decisions in the field of migration.

The findings presented in this article show that interpretations of the migration crises have reinforced already established approaches, rather than promoting changes in perspectives and policy approaches, and in doing so further fuel the potential for the politicization of immigration.

2. Politicization & framing

The politicization of immigration has been growing since the 1990s (Grande et al 2018). Studies exploring politicization processes have usually taken into account socio-economic variables such as migration numbers, unemployment rates, but also political factors, such as electoral systems and the strength of anti-immigrant far right parties (Van der Brug et al. 2015, Grande et al 2018). While greatly enhancing our knowledge about mechanisms of politicization, these studies however have ignored the epistemic dimension of politicization, namely how contested phenomena are understood and made sense of in the first place. The study of framing processes is able to shed light at this epistemic dimension.

Frames can be defined as interpretation schemata that organize experience (see Benford and Snow 2000). Frames provide an answer to what is going on here (diagnosis), and consequently help to provide an answer to the question: what to do next (prognosis). On the one hand, frames hence have a cognitive function. On the other hand, frames can possess also a strategic function (see Voltolini et al in the introduction of this special issue), of promoting a particular perspective of a phenomenon in line with the interests of the actor promoting this perspective. Existing studies so far on framing have predominantly focused on this strategic function, operationalizing politicization as framing contests in public discourse (Triandafyllidou 2018; Gianfreda 2018). These functions (strategic and cognitive), however, are not mutually exclusive; rather, they co-exist, rely on each other, and reinforce each other. While migration policy debates often revolve around rival values and interests, they also invoke knowledge claims, expressing convictions about the causes, dynamics and impacts of immigration (Boswell, Geddes, and Scholten 2011).

In the analysis presented in this paper I take into account the multitude of governance actors, including key actors from different levels and sectors, that inform these claims,

shape understandings, and explore the cognitive dimension of framing. To do this I use interview data, which allows to go beyond shedding light on how actors publicly frame immigration (strategic function of framing), but reveals how they understand it, and make sense of it (cognitive function of framing).

Migration is highly complex; and migration movements are hard to predict. Causes and effects of migration are highly contingent on contextual factors. Faced with complexity, and uncertainty about the phenomenon of international immigration, frames can play an essential part in reducing complexity, to grasp the phenomenon, in order to be able to make decisions (Mayblin 2019). Crises give an additional relevance to framing processes, as situations of crisis cause more uncertainty, often involve a scarcity of information, along with pressures and demands for action; and crises often tend to cause disruption to the usual ways of doing things. Crises thus can induce moments of reflection upon ideas and actions, as governance actors try to figure out what is going on and what should be done in response to this (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010, 183).

As the analysis presented below will reveal, the ways that governance actors frame causes and effects of immigration is strongly influenced by the social context they operate in (cf. Geddes *forthcoming*). When these actors try to understand international migration during moments of crisis, they rely on their previous experiences within their particular organisation and they base their evaluations of the phenomenon on exchange with 'likeminded', trusted actors, i.e. organizations with similar (either liberal or restrictive) approaches to migration. The frames that emerge are supported by specific cues that circulate within actors' networks and that provide 'evidence' for a certain perspective. Given that frames tend to highlight some aspects of reality – which implies that they omit or neglect others – this does mean that frames do not necessarily give an accurate depiction of reality. However, in order to be taken up and to become powerful they have to be plausible (*ibid.*).

As mentioned earlier, depending on which frames emerge, they can potentially either alleviate or entrench polarization between groups opposing or groups supporting immigration, and legitimize viewpoints and modes of governance that cater to one or the other 'side' (see Voltolini et al in this issue).

3. Material and methods

The analysis presented in this article relies on data collected during the time period of 2014 to 2018 through qualitative guided interviews with governance actors in the European Union (supranational governance actors) and selected EU member states (national governance actors), and in the United States, in the framework of an international research project: 'Prospects for International Migration Governance'.

The time frame of the fieldwork, thus, largely corresponds to the crisis period in both settings. In total I conducted 117 interviews in EU institutions and associated agencies in Brussels, as well as member state capitals (Austria, Germany, Netherlands and the United Kingdom), and the capital of the United States, Washington D.C.

The selection of EU member states for fieldwork was based on the fact that these countries are among the largest immigration receiving states in the EU, with a similar immigration history. The point is not to provide detailed analysis of the entire EU and its

different member states, but to identify trends and framing patterns across important immigrant receiving EU states, as well as at the supranational governance level.

The interview partners were composed of state actors (representatives of national governments and associated ministries/departments and agencies); national parliamentary commissions working on migration issues (representatives and/or their staff); EU supranational actors (Commission, Council and Parliament and their organisational units dealing with migration issues, and associated EU agencies working in the field); regional (EU)/country (US) branches of international organisations working on migration, civil society organisations, i.e. groups representing migrants or advocating for migrants' rights; and think tanks.

The interviews explored the views of the interview partners, asking them how they interpreted causes and consequences of international migration; how they evaluated recent developments and key immigration events such as the migration crises; how they evaluated future developments and assessed risks and uncertainties in the field of migration; how they informed themselves; and with whom they exchanged views and experiences in order to fathom the phenomenon of international migration.¹

The interviews were then analysed using a framing approach. I identified an argument as a frame if it exhibited a definition of a problem (what is the problem/what is going on?); a causal interpretation (what is the root of this?); a moral evaluation (why is it negative/positive?); and/or a treatment recommendation (what should we do in response?) (see Entmann 1993).

In addition to analysing data collected through interviews, secondary material was used to complement the analysis, including official documents, policy and position papers, and parliamentary/congressional debates and (in the case of the United States) transcripts of Congressional hearings involving public officials published during the crisis year(s). In the case of the EU this secondary material was deliberately limited to the supranational level, in order to manage the quantity of data.

In this article I focus on the dominant frames. I identified frames as dominant if they a) kept on re-emerging in the material analysed and b) were also referred to by those actors that promoted alternative frames i.e. held competing views. The frames were detected on the basis of an inductive approach.

4. Framing of immigration during the crisis

Which major ways of understanding immigration did the two crises reveal? From my analysis three frames kept re-emerging across the material analysed in both settings, the United States as well as in the European Union: a 'pull factor' frame, a 'migration as a tragedy frame', and a 'push factor' frame.

In the pull factor and the push factor frames the diagnosis was focused on interpreting why increasing migration/asylum seeking flows had emerged. The pull factor frame identified as the primary cause of increasing flows of asylum seekers the (perceived) image of openness of a receiving country. Actors who were blamed for causing the crisis were policy makers spreading a liberal message and/or supporting liberal policies. But also false ideas among migrants about possibilities of migrating and getting permission to stay in the country, often labelled by my interviewees as fake news or myths, and which were said to be partly spread deliberately by those that gained from the attempts of

people to move, such as smugglers, were also often referred to by governance actors. The prognosis which emerged in this pull frame was consequently to counter the liberal outlook of a country through measures of deterrence. The understandings governance actors held based on this frame did take into account that people had relevant (and legitimate) reasons to migrate, but the frame attributed the most crucial and primary cause of triggering of flows to the (perceived) openness of a country.

The second frame that constantly re-emerged in the material analysed was the 'migration as a tragedy' frame. It did not focus on the question of why migration had increased, but rather on the effects of migration. These effects were interpreted as a human tragedy. This frame then put the attention on those that presumably caused the tragedy of migration: namely mostly smugglers. It had a very strong moral component, given that migrants were constructed as harshly exploited by 'unscrupulous smugglers'. The main prognosis about what action should be taken in response to the migration crises was consequently to fight the smugglers.

The third frame, the 'push factor' frame, had some overlap with the 'migration as a tragedy frame' since it saw migrants as victims, challenged by external factors rather than as responding to opportunities to migrate. In contrast to the pull factors frame which put the emphasis on why people come, it focused on why people leave their countries of origin and/or residence, and attributed high flows of migration to factors such as persecution and violence. The prognosis of this frame was consequently emphasizing (an expansion of) protection measures.

The pull factor frame, and the tragedy frame were mainly used by governance actors within state and supranational organizations, but also think tanks and parliamentarians/ and their staff with a restrictive orientation (i.e. actors that had been advocating for the restriction of immigration policies already before the crisis). Most frequently it occurred within agencies and ministries/departments of home affairs, but interestingly also emerged in other units such as development departments, which indicates that home affairs actors were central in shaping perspectives. The push factor frame instead occurred predominantly within immigrant rights and advocacy organizations, pro-immigrant think tanks and international organizations. The framing thus largely mirrored the organizational mandates and/or profiles of the organizations these actors were situated in (migration and deterrence versus rights and protection).

I came across largely the same frame components (such as anecdotes providing cues) across different countries and settings, which highlights the fact that frame components travelled from one context to another, and were shared among 'likeminded' actors. Strikingly similar stories appeared for instance in the Ministry of Interior in country X, Country Z, and Country Y, as well as in the equivalent institution at the supranational EU level.

My intention here is not to evaluate the accuracy of each of these three frames. All frames provide plausible and persuasive explanations about the crisis but none of them offers necessarily a (fully) accurate or comprehensive explanation of the crisis. The 'migration as a tragedy' frame for instance, among other aspects, omits any explanation that smuggling does not evolve in a vacuum, but responds in relation to other actors and has been powerfully influenced by tightening of border controls by state governments. The 'push factor' frame in turn downplays the fact that migrants do not only react to push factors, but are also active agents seizing opportunities. It thus reproduces to some extent

the idea of migrants as victims that was also a key perspective in the ‘migration as tragedy’ frame, supporting a negative association of migration with tragedy and misery.

The frames used by different governance actors eventually promoted contradictory solutions (deterrence versus protection). They established an interpretation that thus added to the existing contestation of migration and to polarized viewpoints on the issue. Let us take now a closer look at these three frames, and the elements (diagnosis, prognosis, and cues) they were composed of.

4.1. The pull factor frame

4.1.1. European Union

In the European Union a major cue used by governance actors in constructing the pull factor frame was the initial open door policy exhibited by the German chancellor Angela Merkel in autumn 2015 and her famous statement ‘Wir schaffen das’ (*we will manage*). This approach was widely recited as one of *the* drivers of increased migration flows during the crisis. Some studies, though, have suggested that migration movements to Germany started well before Germany opened its borders for migrants arriving from other EU member states (IAB 2016). Notwithstanding that so far there is no clear evidence of this effect, this cue provided a plausible diagnosis component and thus widely circulated among governance actors. As a result of this plausibility, in combination with its repetition in political and public debate, it became an important part of the ‘pull framing’ among authorities and agencies in the European Union.

If you say, ‘Welcome’ without any conditions you’ve got 800,000-1,000,000 people arriving immediately. You have 300,000 people from Afghanistan arriving, suddenly. They were not coming before but they got the message. [...], it’s a matter of fact, the situation in Afghanistan has been bad for the last 20 years, [...]. You had the ambassador of Germany, in Afghanistan, one day his driver was not coming, he never came [back], then they were investigating, ‘Where is the driver?’ He’s gone to Germany, and not legally but illegally, because he thought, ‘Okay, I know a bit of German, it’s possible now, and so I’m going to Germany’ [...]. People were selling their apartments in Kabul to finance their trip and go, and they had jobs in Afghanistan, in Kabul. [...] (EU official, October 2017)

As this quote indicates, stories like this one, which contained anecdotal ‘evidence’, circulated in governance actors’ circles, and thus turned into shared cues that helped to shape a common and powerful understanding of what was going on during the crisis.

Diagnostic frame elements of ‘openness’ as a pull factor repeatedly occurred in the interview material at the supranational, as well as on national levels across different countries:

And then we have also had the images at the train stations where some NGO people then appeared there. Even sometimes even from public service they were sent to welcome the refugees. I mean, there’s nothing against welcoming people, but the signal effect was absolutely counterproductive in terms of moderating this flow. It was just putting fuel into the fire [...]. But we could not stop the momentum, or we could not, we may call it, break the wave. The wave went over us for this image, because, and I mentioned that three years before [to you], migration policy is communication policy. This is absolutely key, and once you have a narrative [this image], it’s extremely difficult that you change it (Senior civil servant, Germany, February 2018).

This finding of the potency of the 'pull factor' framing is also supported by research conducted by Steinhilper and Grujters (2018).

4.1.2. The United States

A very similar pull framing also emerged within governance actor circles, especially state actors across different departments, in the United States. The openness of the country (or the perception of it) was seen as the crucial driver of international migration in the 2014 crisis:

[...] it is more of the perception of once they arrive in the United States, will they be able to stay; that causes this to occur, in situations where life is not good and has not been good for quite some time [...] things are just bad; they have been bad for years and for some reasons there is a change in the perception that they are going to receive in the United States that starts the fire. (U.S. Government official, June 2015)

In the U.S. case the diagnostic component of this pull framing often referred to President Obama's 'liberal' immigration policies as being responsible for triggering the 2014 surge. The conviction that it was the perception of the U.S. being open, or 'Barack Obama's non-enforcement policies' (think tank interview, June 2015), as one of my interviewees put it, that made the difference, emerged repeatedly in interviews:

I think it's very hard to deny that human beings respond to incentive. Whether it's true or not, if the messaging can be perceived to be that it's a very welcoming environment, you won't be deported and you'll be able to stay here, that is certainly a powerful incentive for people and it could create a tipping point where they are like, 'Well, maybe I'll go. The violence here is horrible. I need to get out of here.' That may provide a tipping point where that weighs in favour of individuals migrating to the United States. It's a 60:40 split. Whether it's 60%, the push, or 60%, the pull, I think fair people can go either way on that, but you cannot ignore the power of the perception that the environment here in the United States is very friendly to illegal immigration. (Congress staffer, Republican, June 2015)

While this framing was at first mainly employed by the political opponents of the government, a variant of it had been incorporated fairly quickly into the narrative of the administration itself.

The diagnostics of this frame strongly relied (similar to the EU) on the idea of the circulation of misinformation about the country's migration policies, and underlined a lack of enforcement.

Well I think there was some misinformation with what happened recently; and there was the view that some of the laws had changed, you know there was the talk about executive action; there was DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals], which these folks were ineligible for. [...] And also, people weren't seeing consequences, so even if the law says, "This person can't stay they need to be removed" – it wasn't necessarily happening. So, people weren't seeing that. (U.S. Government, June 2015)

Actors picked up certain cues (and not others) to construct their understanding of what was going on, partly because these cues resonated with previous, established ideas. Government officials emphasized that they 'have a sense of what is going to stimulate migration and what isn't' (US government official, June 2015) based on their experience over the years working in the field. Often interview partners referred to prior experiences with previous flows as providing insights for today's flows. For example, when

interpreting the 2014 crisis, the official quoted below from the U.S. State Department referred back to experiences in the 1990s with migration from Cuba and the ‘wet foot, dry foot’ policy, a policy established under President Clinton which turned back Cubans apprehended at sea (wet foot), while those apprehended on soil were permitted to stay (dry foot):

Any Cuban we interdicted would be brought to the US and once they got to US soil they were ‘legal’ [...]. That, again, showed to me that where migrants had a sense that their chances of success actually getting to the US were high, they would do something illegal or something dangerous. So that, too, showed me that we have to make clear that the chances of success are not high and we have to demonstrate that in the policy choices we make (State Department, DC, June 2015).

4.2. Migration as a tragedy frame

In the European Union, the ‘migration as a tragedy’ framing was closely connected to recurring shipwrecks and migrant deaths in the Mediterranean Sea (Collyer and King 2016). The whole crisis perspective largely unravelled through a focus on migrants deaths, highlighting a humanitarian tragedy (ibid.). But though the crisis was seen as a humanitarian tragedy, the major focus was on what was largely coined as irregular migration – irrespective of the fact that many of those arriving legally applied for asylum and often were granted protection – and on those who facilitated their journeys i.e. smugglers. The following citation from a policy document released by the European Commission illustrates the diagnosis (what is going on?) component of this framing:

Ruthless criminal networks organize the journeys of large numbers of migrants desperate to reach the EU. They make substantial gains while putting the migrants’ lives at risk. To maximize their profits, smugglers often squeeze hundreds of migrants onto unseaworthy boats – including small inflatable boats or end-of-life cargo ships – or into trucks. Scores of migrants drown at sea, suffocate in containers or perish in deserts (EC 2015).

In the course of the crisis, other actors, such as NGOs providing search and rescue missions in the Mediterranean, were also made responsible for this ‘human tragedy’. NGOs were widely accused of inadvertently stimulating or even actively causing the migration tragedy. The latest research, however, at best provides unclear answers. There is simply not enough evidence to provide any conclusions as to whether rescue operations are incentivizing migration via sea routes (see Lanati and Recchi 2020). A key claim in this accusation was that smugglers put migrants out on the sea because they allegedly knew they would get a ‘pick up’ service by NGOs. In early 2017, the Italian chief prosecutor of the Sicilian port city Catania even claimed to have proof of NGOs colluding with people smugglers, an accusation that had to be taken back given a lack of evidence (Scherer 2017). As a result of these debates Italian NGOs, however, had to sign a code of conduct prescribed by the Italian government, curtailing their search and rescue missions considerably (see HRW 2017).

The fact that this frame was more dominant in textual documents than in my interview data suggests that this frame is likely to have served a strategic purpose rather than representing the outcome of a cognitive process of understanding. This view is also supported by the statements of a key governance actor interviewed:

An essential part of our work is to try to fill the narrative with policy, in a way, because sometimes we get very fancy phrases which our political headmasters say here and there because this is a catchy word where they can look good and look successful. Then we have to fill it with substance. It happens very often. For example, this emphasis on disrupting smuggler networks and trafficking, it came from the top, definitely, as a catchphrase. Then we had to substantiate it with concrete action. There were even some proposals to go as far as developing a rationale/argument for declaring smuggling and trafficking, as crimes against humanity. After substantive analysis by lawyers, by diplomats at expert level, it became evident that this is a no go. We had to think of other specific actions in order to justify this narrative about disrupting smuggler networks [...] (EU official, October 2017).

As this statement indicates, the identifying of smugglers as the key responsible party for the suffering of migrants, which is a main component within the ‘migration as a tragedy’ framing, can be viewed as an example of how an existing solution attaches itself to a policy problem, rather than a solution emerging as a response to a problem. As policy scholar Kingdon (1984) observed, policy problems and solutions are not necessarily causally or temporally linked; i.e. problems do not necessarily initiate policy responses; instead, it might well be that multiple solutions are waiting to attach themselves to a particular problem. Solutions favoured by certain governance actors for addressing a particular policy problem may have been on the agenda before, but they might not have garnered enough support at the time. They might be later picked up when an opportunity opens up. Solutions thus may have preceded policy problems, and preferred ‘solutions’ can shape which problems get attention, and how these problems are defined.

4.2.1. United States

The ‘migration as a tragedy’ framing did emerge relatively soon at the start of the crisis in the U.S. as well. This can also be attributed to the fact that the arriving migrants were composed to a large extent of a group commonly considered as particularly vulnerable: namely minors.

The view that this human tragedy could have been prevented if the borders were not out of control, was one of the main components of this diagnosis. As in the European Union, this notion of being out of control was closely linked with notions of mass irregular immigration, human trafficking, and smuggling. The arriving migrant children were depicted as being prey to unscrupulous smugglers. Migrant children were constructed as being put in danger because of ‘porous’ borders and a lack of deterrence measures.

I agree we do have a humanitarian problem. These are vulnerable children whose lives are on the line. [...] We must send a very strong signal that there is no benefit and no avenue for them to remain in the United States. We must do this so the children are not lured into dire situations [...]. (Congress 2014 (Sen. Grassley))

The ‘migration as a tragedy’ framing was at first fostered prominently by the GOP, particularly by anti-immigration hardliners within the party. However, this framing with its focus on smugglers was also fairly quickly incorporated into the perspective of the government (cf. also Muzaffar and Hipsman 2015):

In recent weeks, we’ve seen a surge of unaccompanied children arrive at the border, brought here and to other countries by smugglers and traffickers. The journey is unbelievably dangerous for these kids. The children who are fortunate enough to survive it will be taken care of while they go through the legal process, but in most cases that process will lead to

them being sent back home. I've sent a clear message to parents in these countries not to put their kids through this. [...] With our international partners, we're taking new steps to go after the dangerous smugglers who are putting thousands of children's lives at risk. (President Obama 2014)

Thus, in both cases, in the European Union and the U.S., the figure of the smuggler was a central component in the framing of immigration in the context of the recent crises. For the U.S. as well as for the EU, scholarly research (Sanchez 2018) has underlined, however, that the negative role of smuggling portrayed by this framing is largely inflated.

4.3. The push factor frame

These two framings were not shared by all governance players in the field. Pro-immigrant and human rights organizations especially, in both the EU and the U.S, have been opposing this deterrence focused prognosis and policy action with a counter-framing that puts its focus more on legitimate push factors in the migrants' countries of origin, and so opposing the pull factor frame in particular.

Similarly to the governance actors who exhibited a pull factor framing, those governance actors in the European Union who were promoting a push factor framing did not ignore other factors, including pull factors. But eventually the emphasis was rather on the push factors that were seen as causing migration in the first place.

I think there's a tendency, especially at the European policy level, to very much think in pull factors. You know, "okay, we are giving people too much money when they get here, or we're too attractive." I haven't made my mind up but I would say that it is first and foremost the push factor, you know. Look at the Syrian conflict. You can, well, it's ridiculous to talk in terms of pull factors towards Europe, at least in the initial movement. [...] (NGO, March 2015)

The approach of these type of actors was reactive and in this sense can be seen as part of a strategic framing, targeting and contesting the deterrence approach by EU governments:

The system is inhumane, it's inefficient, it doesn't work. All these people who are detained, [...]. There's no good reason to detain those people. Most of them you can't deport, so why are you detaining them? The only answer I can get from policy-makers is, "Oh, it will deter others." It doesn't deter anybody. (International organization, April 2015).

The framing among pro-immigrant rights actors I interviewed in the EU was less confrontational towards government approaches and framings than in the U.S. though, or as an interviewee put it: 'What I see is, for us and NGOs around us, that we have, over maybe the last 10–15 years, become or have felt forced to become much more understanding the government's position' (NGO, March 2015).

4.3.1. United States

In the U.S., as in the EU, the push factor framing was about countering actors with deterrence approaches based on pull factor framings. The following quote from an interviewee illustrates this sort of counter-framing:

They [Border Patrol] are very convinced that there is this level of understanding of migrants in Central America as to the minutia of U.S. policy and U.S. immigration law and policy that

correlates and responds [...] I think there's this, quite frankly, absurd assumption that Central Americans have a very nuanced understanding of U.S. immigration policy, but they just don't. [...] what we're seeing is people are also going to Costa Rica and Panama and Mexico. Their asylum numbers are skyrocketing also [...] I think, again, that really validates the push factors as more important than any pull factor' (NGO, October 2018).

The major focus in this framing in the U.S. case was on new forms of violence perpetrated by non-state actors pushing people out of their countries:

[...] Five years ago I represented a lot of children and it was about poverty, it was about opportunity, it was about bettering their lives. Some of them, for domestic violence reasons, but that was the exception not the rule [...] things have changed in Central America. The government [in the region] never had the structural means [to protect the citizens], it didn't exist after the wars [...]. These kids are refugees. We have been saying that for a year (International organization, Washington D.C., June 2015).

This view also occurred within circles of liberal (in terms of migration policy) oriented parliamentarians and their staff, who directly relied, at least in some part, on information exchange with the organizations that promoted this framing. This pattern recurred, though, across all groups of governance actors interviewed: information is predominantly sought within trusted and likeminded circles.

4.4. Frame prognoses & policy responses

The prognosis (what should be done?) taken on the basis of the diagnosis in the pull factor and tragedy framings, was to address the migration crises with measures of deterrence. The prognosis of the push factor framing instead was, rather, about granting protection and rights, and opposed solutions of deterrence.

While policy measures in response to the crises also contained some protection elements, we can see that it was the prognosis of the pull factor and the tragedy framing that was widely mirrored in key policy responses (for an overview of policy responses see e.g. Geddes, Hadj Abdou, and Brumat 2020 for the EU,; Musalo and Lee 2017 for the U.S.).

A good example mirroring the logic of both the pull factor and the tragedy frames can be seen in communication campaigns in migrants' countries of origin, launched by the EU, several of its member states (see Oeppen 2016), and by the U.S. (Musalo and Lee 2017) as a response to the crises. In both settings these campaigns were aimed at effective deterrence of flows, as the following statement demonstrates:

We really need to go into the country of origin where they live, and depart, to convince people, "Don't take the risk." From what I've seen and according to experts on the information campaigns is the impact is bigger if you explain to the migrants what will happen when they are in Europe. [...] The fact that you risk dying at sea is not a major factor for them because they know it now, it's all over the media. They know it and sometimes they say, "We have one chance in twenty to die at sea, we'll take the risk and I'll take my chance." But if it is explaining, "First of all, you might die. Secondly, you might end up in detention in Libya in awful conditions, if you are a girl you might be raped, and so on and so forth. But on top of it, when you arrive in Europe it's not going to be paradise because you already have one million guys who have just arrived and are searching for jobs. You're not going to find a job. You're going to be in tough conditions. Don't do it." Then it has a better impact [...] (EC, October 2017).

This is not to say that policy approaches other than deterrence oriented ones were absent. But it is fair to say that deterrence was among the strongest policy components in both settings, and as my data suggests, the policy responses consequently strongly resonated with the understanding of causes and effects of migration by key governance actors:

Today I have minus 25 % arrivals on the Central Mediterranean route. Why? Because the borders are better controlled. So in the short term it is a false assumption to tell me that the border controls do not work. Border controls and anti-smuggling policy have proved to be the only policies that actually delivers results in the short term. [...] (EC, October 2017).

Often the frames, and policies based on them, were also supported by perceptions of governance actors about how the public felt about increasing flows, which justified control and deterrence in both settings. The issue of public opinion came up, especially during the follow up interviews, when people were reflecting retrospectively about developments since the crisis. To cite again an example from the EU:

We must make sure that we do not create additional pull factors, and that we start to exercise control over who comes here, because only then can we get the support from our own society (EU member state official, March 2018).

The policy approaches taken, while containing some additional or strengthened components, such as a stronger emphasis on communication campaigns, represent a continuance of approaches that had been established in both settings since the 1990s.

In the European Union a fear of large scale movements post-1989 was a main driver of policy development. The EU regulation framework mostly focused on stemming immigration defined as 'unwanted', i.e. asylum seeking and irregular migration (Geddes, Hadj Abdou, and Brumat 2020). Similarly, from the late 1980s U.S. migration policy attention increasingly turned to the border with Mexico and was strongly focused on 'prevention through deterrence' (Rosenblum 2011).

5. Conclusions

This article has analysed the ways in which immigration has been interpreted in the context of migration crises in the European Union and the United States. The analysis revealed that the ways in which causes and effects of immigration were framed has been similar across these two different settings. Substantive differences in framing occurred between different groups of actors rather than between different country/regional settings.

Governance actors operating within governmental contexts and other actors that can be categorized as 'border hawks' (this includes home affairs actors, restriction oriented parliamentarians, and restriction oriented think tanks) framed the crisis in a way that supported established deterrence approaches, approaches that had been in place in both the EU and the U.S. since the 1990s.

Pro-immigrant civil society organizations as well as liberal parliamentarians and their staff, in contrast, exhibited a framing that focused on push factors, supporting protection based approaches to the crises. Frames used by governance actors were thus in line with pre-set mandates and profiles of the organizations they operated in. The extent to which

cues informing these frames (such as anecdotal evidence), circulated among these different 'likeminded' groups is striking.

In sum, the results of my analysis demonstrate that framing is strongly related to organizational settings, and the environment actors are placed in, and is thus about finding solutions to address pre-set concerns, and policy goals. In that sense prognoses and (policy) solutions partly exist before problems arise, which explains why policy approaches in both settings did not significantly change.

What do these ways of framing imply for bigger questions of processes of politicization, and the conflict between those that oppose a post-national world and those in favour of open borders? The polarized way of understanding migration during the crisis does play into this conflict, corroborating opposing viewpoints. The major frames that emerged in response to the crises, notwithstanding which policy solution -deterrence or protection -they promote, also entrench an understanding of migration as something outside of normality. They establish ideas of migration as a phenomenon that should be prevented, and/or as something that is connected to misery and tragedy. Either way, they are tapping into fears and concerns about international migration. Research (Gilligan and Marley 2010) has underlined that by focusing on it foremost as a tragedy, migration is linked to threat, and immigrants' experiences are constructed as radically different to those of the rest of society, which makes it difficult to identify with migrants as equals.

Given that it is these types of alienating and polarized understandings that have dominated debates and have shaped policy responses, the likelihood of new ways of thinking about immigration emerging that can cut through the existing divisions does seem rather slim.

The findings presented in this article have emphasized that it is situated agency that drives framing. The question future research needs to pick up on then, is how to diversify the organizational settings actors operate in, to change pre-set perspectives and policy goals that inform judgements about immigration, so that new ways of understanding can emerge. We need a paradigm change beyond cosmopolitanism and communitarianism to address the existing societal divisions.

Note

1. Interviewees were ensured confidentiality, names of interviewees and their exact institutional affiliation are hence anonymized.

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