

Migrations in the Mediterranean

Public Opinion toward Immigration, Refugees, and Identity in Europe: A Closer Look at What Europeans Think and How Immigration Debates Have Become So Relevant

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Recent dramatic changes in Europe's political landscape are closely related to an increase in support for parties that take a strong stance against immigration. The purpose of this article is to provide a nuanced picture of public opinion on the issue of immigration, and specifically refugees, provide some background on why these issues are important, and examine how the issue has been instrumentalized by authoritarian populists in Europe to mobilize the public in their support.

During the 2015 refugee and migration peak, migration policy once again came into the spotlight as the continent experienced a sharp surge in arrivals, with numbers reaching a million.¹ Since 2015, migration flows across the Mediterranean have decreased dramatically, to 390,000 in 2016 (over 360,000 of whom arrived by sea),² 184,316 in 2017³ and 141,472 in 2018.⁴ Italy and Greece were at the forefront of the crisis, with thousands arriving at their shores and borders. The images of thousands of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Germany have also

become part of Europeans' collective memory and shaped the course of politics in the country and the continent.

The number of Greece sea arrivals dropped dramatically following the EU-Turkey Statement of 18 March 2016 from over 850,000 arrivals in 2015, to only 170,000 in 2016.⁵ In March 2019, the European Commission declared the refugee and migrant "crisis" over. As the Mediterranean route becomes harder to cross, Spain is now the main entry point for crossing into Europe. By the latter part of 2018, Spain was receiving twice as many migrants as Greece and six times as many as Italy, although most were coming from Mali, Guinea, Ivory Coast and Gambia, instead of the Middle East.⁶

Immigration is now a prominent feature on the political agenda of parties across Europe, with extreme-right populist leaders across the continent campaigning on an anti-immigration agenda and instrumentalizing fears about immigration to present an *us vs. them* discourse to rally supporters. Even in countries with low levels of migration, such as Hungary, leaders like Victor Orban have made immigration a central plank in their platform.

Despite the decrease in arrivals, according to the Eurobarometer, immigration is still considered the main

¹ CONNOR, Phillip. "Number of Refugees to Europe Surges to Record 1.3 Million in 2015." *Pew Research Center*, 2016. Retrieved from www.pewglobal.org/2016/08/02/number-of-refugees-to-europe-surges-to-record-1-3-million-in-2015/.

² MCAULIFFE, Marie and RUHS, Martin (eds.). "World Migration Report 2018." *International Organization for Migration (IOM)*, 2018. Retrieved from https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2018_en.pdf.

³ UNHCR, "Operation Portal Refugee Situations: Mediterranean Situation." 2019. Retrieved from <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ MCAULIFFE, Marie and RUHS, Martin (eds.). "World Migration Report 2018." *International Organization for Migration (IOM)*, 2018. Retrieved from https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2018_en.pdf.

⁶ BENAVIDES, Lucia. "Spain Now Sees More Migrant Arrivals Than Any Other European Country." *NPR*, 2018. Retrieved from www.npr.org/2018/09/20/647526020/spain-now-sees-more-migrant-arrivals-than-any-other-european-country?t=1556036868123.

concern by 40 percent of Europeans.⁷ How is it that, despite significant changes on migration flows and policy, this remains such a contested issue?

The public is often presented as divided into two camps: those who hold open views and wholly support immigration, and those who strongly oppose it. More in Common's studies reveal that, in most countries, these two groups exist, but they do not constitute the majority of the population

Public opinion on immigration is often discussed at the level of preference (e.g. do Europeans want more or less migration?) or assessment (e.g. is immigration good or bad for the country?). Why and how it has become so prominent (or issue-salient) and the nuances amongst the public are less discussed.

Public opinion on immigration is also often discussed in the context of a divided citizenry. In this way, the public is often presented as divided into two camps: those who hold open views and wholly support immigration, and those who strongly oppose it. More in Common's studies reveal that, in most countries, these two groups exist, but they do not constitute the majority of the population. There are other segments of the population who hold more ambiguous and flexible views.⁸

Why Is Immigration Such a Big Deal in Europe?

The challenge of immigration is far greater than a management and integration challenge. Debates about immigration have become highly emotional and are now

a central feature of the agenda of authoritarian populist parties. Immigration has become a divisive issue even in countries such as the United States, where immigration had always been seen more favourably. Immigration has generally been viewed more negatively in Europe. While on the aggregate there has been a small decrease in negative sentiment overall, it seems that attitudes towards immigration in Europe are mixed, although they still tend to skew more to the negative. While most Europeans (38%) believe that immigration is more of a problem than an opportunity, many also believe that immigration is both a problem and an opportunity in equal measures (31%).⁹ However, this does not necessarily mean that Europeans feel negatively towards immigrants themselves, as most also think that immigrants have had a positive impact on society overall (42%). In fact, 72 percent agree that immigrants make it easier to fill jobs for which it is difficult to find workers.¹⁰

The prominence of immigration in national debates is likely the result of a combination of factors. Firstly, immigration is connected to many other issues. The challenges around managing immigration flows and the refugee crisis reveal many of the system's failures. In Europe, a lack of coordination and mismanagement displayed what many perceived as a lack of control and sovereignty. In this way, immigration is a policy area that is seen as showcasing a state's ability (or inability) to exercise sovereignty by admitting or excluding non-citizens. The British referendum on the European Union is a prime example of this, made evident by the slogan of the Leave campaign: "Take Back Control." Secondly, the current backlash against immigration is happening against a backdrop of fast economic, technological and demographic shifts that were exacerbated by the 2007 financial crisis, as well as in a context of decreasing trust in politics and institutions. Europe saw unemployment rates peak in 2013 at 11 percent, almost twice as high as they were before the financial crisis began. The situation has particularly affected southern Europe, where countries such as Spain and Greece saw rates reach over 25 percent

⁷ EUROPEAN COMMISSION. "Autumn 2018 Standard Eurobarometer." 2018. Retrieved from www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/heard/eurobarometer.

⁸ See More in Common's studies at www.moreincommon.com.

⁹ EUROPEAN COMMISSION. "Integration of immigrants in the European Union." 2018. Retrieved from <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/survey/getsurveydetail/instruments/special/surveyky/2169>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

at their peak. While levels of unemployment have improved over the years, these countries continue to have high rates today (14 percent and 18 percent respectively).¹¹

Thirdly, the topic of immigration bridges issues of security and identity; religion and terrorism; political correctness and stifled discourse; globalization and the economy; divides between voters and elites; and the declining trust in governments, institutions and the media. In this way, attitudes towards immigration cannot be analysed in isolation, as they are not developed in a void but rather in relation to the wider European context. These links are willingly reinforced by those who oppose immigration. Immigrants are often portrayed as posing a security threat to the nation, but this threat is extended to encompass threats to traditions and local culture as well as public health risks. In Italy, 39 percent believe that immigrants pose a public health risk,¹² and 42 percent of Greeks hold the same belief.¹³ In this way, the public's anxieties are heightened by arrivals being presented as a danger to society.

Finally, debates around immigration are also extremely connected to specific notions and insecurities about national identity. Group identities influence people's attitudes and behaviours. Immigration debates bring to the fore differences in attitudes towards national identity (and the importance given to it) amongst the population and between those who have more open and closed views. Immigration is used to redefine who belongs to an "us" defined in opposition to a "them." Concerns over the strength of one's national identity increase when immigrants are framed through this lens. It becomes an issue that reflects fears about the destruction of one's in-group, traditions and way of life and reinforces cultural insecurities. Both as a result and a cause, it is an issue that can be, and has been, easily instrumentalized by those with authoritarian populist tendencies.

Attitudinal Segmentation: Key Findings

For the past three years, More in Common has been analysing public attitudes in established democra-

cies to better understand the forces that are driving us apart, and what can bring us back together. Working with social psychologists and leading market research firms, we have commissioned detailed national studies in the United States, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Greece.

National segmentation studies provide unique insights into the landscape of public opinion because they create a more complete picture of how people see the world, connecting their views across a wide range of issues to their values, group identity and demographics. In More in Common's segmentation studies, groups are defined by their attitudes and beliefs, not demographics. From this research, we have identified several cross-cutting findings, with national specificities.

The Public Is Not Divided into Two Groups at Loggerheads with Each Other

In all countries where More in Common has conducted research, the data has revealed that, based on attitudes and underlying beliefs, no society can be accurately described as divided into two groups. In all countries, we observed the existence of at least one very welcoming group ("the open group") and one very opposed group ("the closed group"). They are the most vocal and actively engaged with this topic.

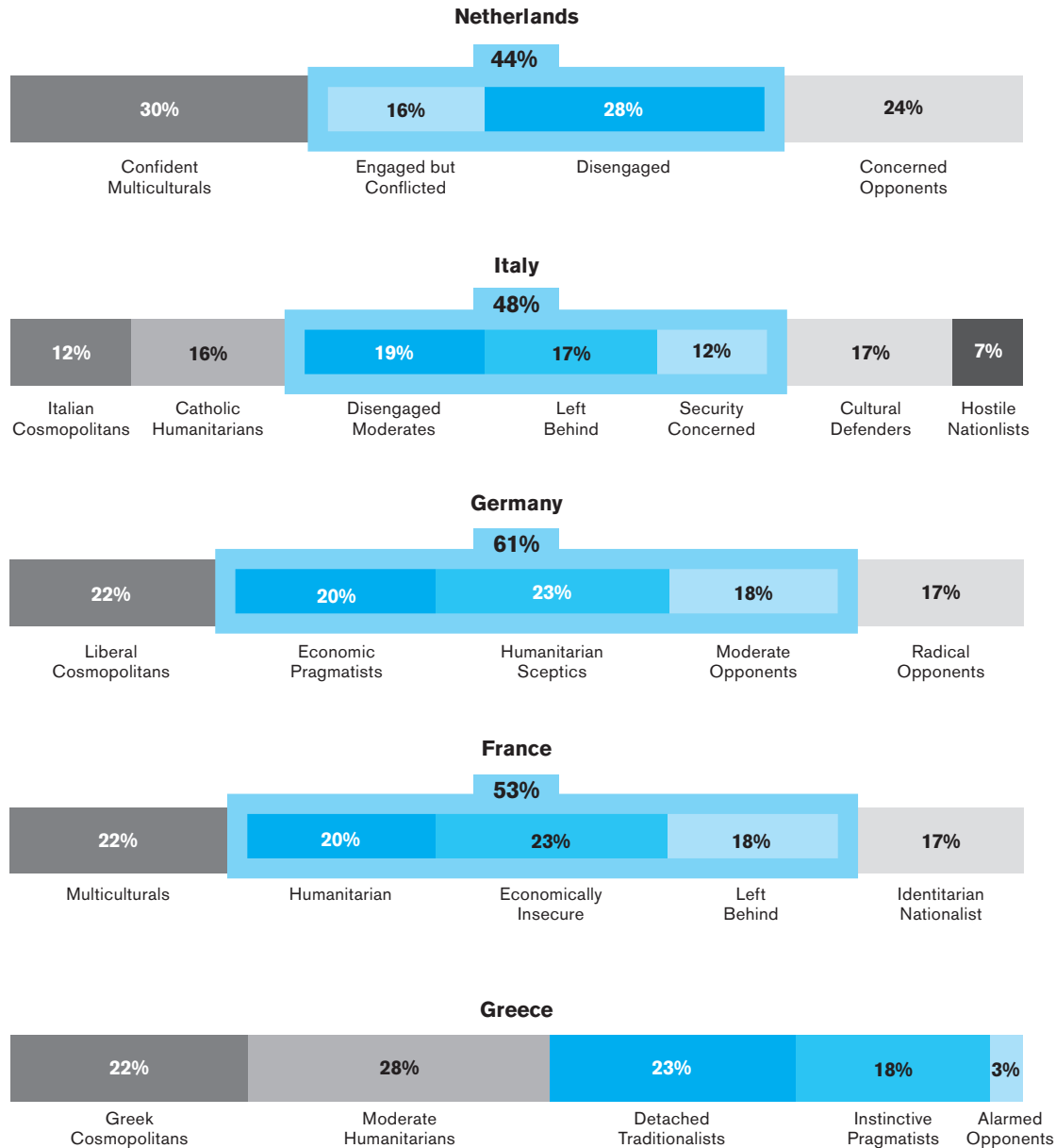
The views of the most open and closed groups are more frequently present in social and traditional media than the views of those who have less strident attitudes. They have a disproportionate effect on public discourse, creating a distorted impression that their views represent those of most of the public. As a result, they have a larger effect on shaping the narrative around immigration.

However, most Europeans hold a variety of views which are more flexible, ambiguous and sometimes conflicting. For example, most believe in the moral imperative of welcoming refugees while at the same time worry that most people trying to enter Europe as refugees are not really refugees.

¹¹ EUROSTAT. "Unemployment by sex and age – monthly average." 2019. Retrieved from <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>.

¹² MORE IN COMMON. "Attitudes Towards National Identity, Immigration, and Refugees in Italy." 2018. Retrieved from www.moreincommon.com/italy-report1.

¹³ MORE IN COMMON. "Attitudes Towards National Identity, Immigration, and Refugees in Greece." 2019.



Source: UNHCR Desperate journeys 2018

There Are Generally Two or Three Distinctive Middle Groups, Whose Characteristics Are Country Specific

Aggregate analysis at the European level allows for the identification of trends, but it fails to capture the country-level nuances that stem from historical and socio-cultural particularities. Middle groups are less ideological and less actively involved in the topic. While there are several middle groups in all the

countries where More in Common has conducted studies, the characteristics of the middle groups are specific to each one of them.

There are greater similarities between the most open and closed segments, which helps explain similar overall trends in public discourse across Europe. Open segments across countries are welcoming across a range of issues, while the most closed segments display similar levels of anger, connect immigration to security, health and cultural threats, and

often share nativist attitudes. Even between similarly open/closed segments, however, there are national differences. For example, open segments in northern Europe tend to view globalization positively, whereas Greece's equivalent group does not share this sentiment.

Example: Disengaged segments across Europe.

In three European countries – the Netherlands, Italy and Greece – and in the United States, statistical analysis has identified middle segments which showcase lower levels of engagement with the topic of immigration and refugees or which are reluctant to engage with the topic.

- *Dutch Disengaged.* These are characterized by having less interest in social and political issues. They take a neutral stance with regards to practically all matters relating to immigration and the influence of immigrants on the Netherlands. Their disengagement seems to be motivated by a reluctance to engage in debate and their concern that immigration causes division in society. They feel that there is a lot of pressure in the Netherlands to be in favour of or against refugees.
- *Italian Disengaged Moderates.* They often do not express a view on issues of national identity, immigration and refugees. They do not believe that there is pressure to speak and think a certain way on immigration issues, and, when they do express their views, they are likely to voice positive attitudes that are more aligned with the views of the Italian open segments. They tend to empathize and identify with immigrants and refugees, and if they display scepticism it is because they see themselves in a similar struggle to improve their situation in an uncondusive environment.
- *Greek Instinctive Pragmatists.* They are less engaged than other segments in their country but are very different from Italian and Dutch disengaged segments. Instinctive Pragmatists are unique in holding optimistic views about the economic consequences of globalization and they are also the most likely to believe in the economic benefits of immigration. However, they hold colder than average feelings towards immigrants, refugees and Muslims, and are very

concerned about terrorism. They believe that allowing refugees into the country increases security risks, which results in an overall opposition. They are the segment less likely to feel comfortable expressing their views on these topics in Greece.

On some issues, there are significant differences between northern and southern European countries' response to the refugee and migration crisis. Italians and Greeks view globalization far more negatively. While most open segments across Europe tend to have a positive view of the economic impact of globalization, this is not true for the Greek Multiculturals (81 percent view it negatively) and the Italian Cosmopolitans (50 percent disagree it has been positive).

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There are also differences in Euroscepticism and feelings towards the EU. Italians and Greeks feel that the European Union has not done enough to support their countries. Notably, in line with the views of open segments in other countries, Italian Cosmopolitans and Catholic Humanitarians (both open groups) display very low levels of support for the idea of distancing the country from the EU. However, in Greece, both the most open segment (37 percent) and the most closed segment (47 percent) are more likely to support distancing.

In Germany, France and the Netherlands, there is a widespread sense that there is pressure to speak in a certain way about issues related to immigration and refugees. This is not true of Italy and Greece, where citizens feel that they can express their views comfortably.

Most Europeans Understand the Technical Difference between Immigrants and Refugees, but They Are Both Seen as “the Other”

The prominence of debate about immigration policies in recent years has raised awareness regarding the distinctions between different forms of migration. Europeans demonstrate relatively high levels of understanding of the definitional differences between refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and economic migrants and high levels of support for the principle of asylum.

Yet when prompted to allocate attributes to each category, Europeans show how both immigrants and refugees are lumped together in a larger category of “the other,” rather than really being perceived differently.

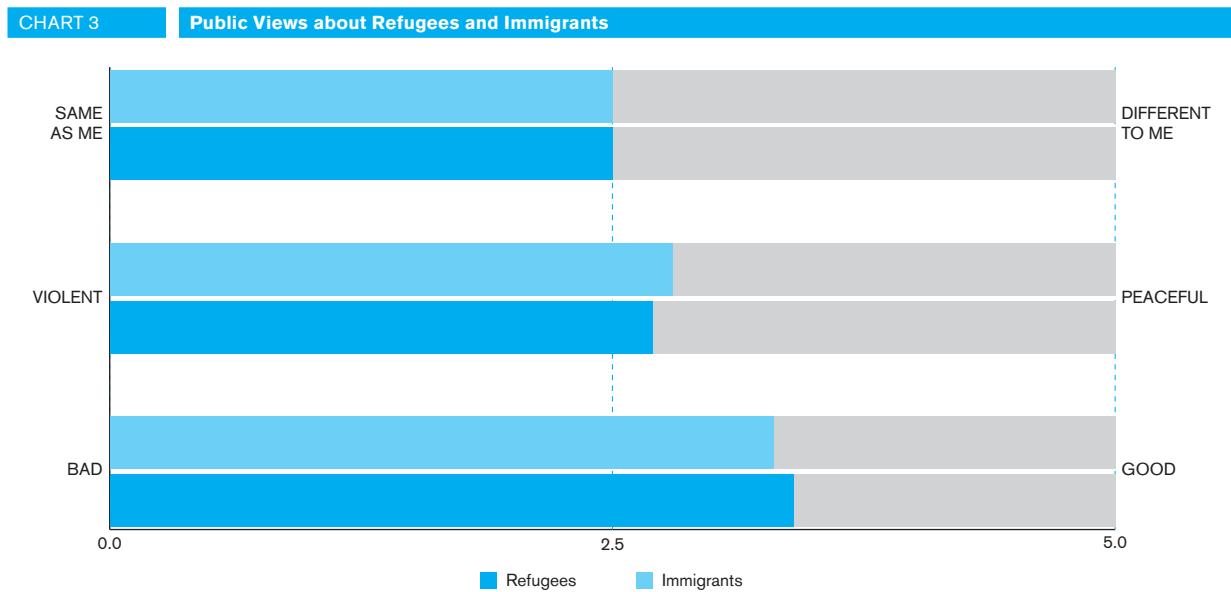
In France, Germany and the Netherlands, More in Common conducted tests to see whether at the rational and subconscious levels citizens really distinguish between the two groups. The results show how there is little difference in how they perceive each of them.

The subsuming of all newcomers into an “other” group is related to the belief that many trying to claim asylum in Europe are in fact economic migrants, but this association is also constantly reinforced by authoritarian populists that promote an us vs. them discourse.

In circumstances of increasingly polarized or fractured countries, people are more likely to view issues through the group identity lens of an in-group that is being threatened by hostile out-groups. This means that they begin to interpret complex issues through the lens of the potential gains or losses to the in-group. Xenophobic populists intensify the strength of group identities by advancing polarizing narratives centred on conflict between the interests of nationals (“us”) vs. those of immigrants, the modern times out-group of choice (along with Muslims). Public debate in European countries where authoritarian populists are gaining supporters (such as Spain, Italy, Germany, France or Hungary, among others) clearly display this playbook.

Conclusions

Debates on immigration are rarely only about immigration itself. Behind grand statements about immigration, whether positive or negative, lie particular conceptions of who we are as citizens and what a nation ought to do and be. In Europe, the conversation has been as much about responding to the refugee and migration flows from the southern shores of the Mediterranean as about the capacity of countries on the northern shores to create a social project that people can feel that they belong to. Rejection of mi-



Sources: “Attitudes Towards National Identity, Immigration and Refugees in Germany” Research Reports published by More in Common, 2017.

grants and refugees is often a sign of unease with us – with ourselves – as much as it is about reticence about them – the other.

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Insecurities around culture and identity in times of vast economic inequality and rapid change are aptly exploited by far-right authoritarian populist parties. They prey on people's fears and elevate them, a strategy that is easy to follow. In doing so, attention is channelled towards the migration issue, as has been evident across the continent. Yet talking about current challenges does not need to go hand in hand with turning against migrants or focusing the public debate on this topic. France is a clear example of this. While the National Rally centred much of its discourse (and much of its decades' long rise) on an anti-migration platform, the recent national conversation and the

Gilets Jaunes movement hardly ever mention immigration. Perhaps immigration has been force fed to angry disenfranchised masses as the most convenient frame for channelling their discontent.

Across Europe, significant numbers of citizens are expressing a profound sense of a loss of control and all-time low levels of trust in institutions and the system. Leaders such as Matteo Salvini have aptly identified and exploited people's pressure points and learnt how to respond to them in an effective and skilfully-communicated way. It is thus concerning that Salvini will claim to have stopped the refugee influx into Italy and regained control for Italians when for years Italians felt that they had a weak and corrupt state. Similarly, in Spain, Santiago Abascal has positioned his extreme far-right party Vox as the party of order and anti-migration. In the 2019 elections, they went from 0 seats in Congress to 24.

If far-right authoritarian populists are seen as the only parties providing genuine real control and rule of law, they are likely to extend their political gains. They will be able to entrench us vs. them narratives, redefine narrower and nativist conceptions of national identity, and further erode liberal democracy.

Many of the anxieties and concerns that citizens express are valid and legitimate and deserve the attention of pundits and leaders alike. However, in order to understand public opinion on immigration, its study cannot be detached from the wider context and its connection with a greater array of issues.