

# European Policy Brief

*Policy implications of TransSOL - European paths to transnational solidarity at times of crisis*

## European Momentum Lost – Public Solidarity Contestation during the ‘Refugee Crisis’ An Analysis of Public Debates in the Mass Media

Public opinion on refugees as represented in the media has generally been found to be very supportive, at least initially. Initiated by the German decision to ‘open borders’, European solidarity gained momentum since humanitarian tragedies taking place at external borders were relocated to the very heart of Europe. In this month of September 2015, newspapers enthusiastically reported on the ‘Welcoming Culture’, showing citizens’ strong solidarity with arriving refugees. However, strongly influenced by events like the terror attacks in Paris, the aftermath of September 2015 witnessed an increased political contestation about migration management and the integration of refugees, remaining largely confined to the national context. Highlighting the disagreement between politicians and other actors, the analysis conducted for this TransSOL work package shows how the peoples of Europe – and especially politicians – while formally united in solidarity, find it hard to interpret and implement solidarity, especially in the context of European Integration.

### Evidence

More generally, solidarity has been defined as the readiness to share resources with others. This seems a particularly important aspect when discussing refugees that come to us as people who have often lost or left behind all their belongings and even parts of their family in unsafe and war-ridden countries. And the topic’s saliency massively increased with huge numbers of asylum-seekers arriving in the middle of 2015. The so-called refugee ‘crisis’, then, was fuelled by the decision of German chancellor Angela Merkel to suspend the Dublin Regulation requiring that asylum-seekers be registered in their country of

first entry to the EU. This meant that refugees could be rejected at the borders of non-first-entry countries and, by suspending the regulation, refugees could now move freely towards Germany. The decision was first celebrated as a historical victory of human rights over national interests but later on increasingly contested as naïve and irresponsible, opening doors for terrorists and so-called economic migrants from safe countries ‘undeserving’ of help. Overall, the large wave of refugees entering the EU during September 2015 and the following months created yet another litmus test for European solidarity, which had already become eroded by earlier crises. It is exactly this contestation of solidarity that the fifth TransSOL work package has focused on.

The contestation of refugee politics happens mostly in the news media, where issues are portrayed in one way or another, and arguments and their proponents or opponents are made visible to a broader audience. By looking into solidarity contestation in the media, TransSOL adds to the existing political and academic discussion, which has concentrated on the depiction of the ‘crisis’ and refugees as such. More specifically, TransSOL teams have conducted a claims analysis, complemented by a Facebook user commenting analysis, to find out who favours solidarity with refugees – and on which grounds.

### Divided in Solidarity: Between ‘Welcoming Culture’ and Migration Management

Political representatives are, as tends to be the case in the media (and during crises in particular), overwhelmingly prominent in the debate about

solidarity with refugees, while at the same time appearing less supportive. Civil society actors, in contrast, are less visible but are promoters of solidarity with refugees.

More specifically, claims were more pro-solidarity in 2015 than in 2016 (Figure 1). Checking the curves against the occurrence of real-life events, drops can be immediately related to the attacks in Paris of 13 November 2015 and the events on New Year's Eve 2015/16 in Cologne. Projecting an image of refugees as terrorists or molesters, these events let solidarity with refugees drop considerably and opened up space for anti-solidarity promoters capitalizing on social fears with regard to terrorism and xenophobia.

Political actors were most visible in the debate: In 72% of the claims we coded, political actors (i.e., representatives of any kind of state-like institution such as members of parliament, ministries, executive agencies, mayors, regional parliaments, the UN or the EU) were coded as claimants. The remaining claimants were representatives of civil society in the broadest sense (e.g., trade unions, NGOs, political groups and organizations, citizens or the church), research institutes, companies and other economic actors, media and journalists or celebrities. Looking at how solidarity was promoted within the two groups of political and non-political actors across countries reveals a divide: Whilst following similar trends, political actors were on average much more negative than the rest of claimants (Figure 2).

National claimants were most prominent, too (61% of all claims) (Figure 3 and Figure 4), while the regional (19%) and a larger-than-national (20%) scope of claimants was less visible, but almost equally so. Regarding solidarity, a regional level equals a higher degree, which suggests that those actors immediately in touch with refugees – arriving at their train stations or landing on their island – are more inclined to support them, too. Results for actors with national scopes seem quite sobering, displaying a strong negative tendency. Yet, when the claimant was domestic (from the country for which the claims was coded), solidarity was supported more than in such cases when national claimants came from other EU countries or from a non-EU context. Thus, negativity seem mainly 'imported' from the outside.

The strong prominence of political actors immediately connects to the fact that migration management (e.g., border management, registration of asylum seekers, relocation of refugees or the cooperation with non-EU countries such as Turkey over keeping refugees in their country)

were the most discussed issues in all countries (Table 1). Migration management claims were also prone to be more anti-refugee on average (Figure 5). Ranking second in most countries was the issue of the causes of migration or the background and fate of refugees, which was mostly discussed in a pro-solidarity context. This suggests that the causes of the refugee crisis are acknowledged as a legitimate reason for refugees to leave their homes and search for a better life somewhere else.

Making claims about the issue of the integration of refugees, claimants promoted a rather positive approach towards refugees. However, problematic consequences of the massive inflow of refugees, which also concerned the long-term integration of refugees, were debated in a rather negative tone. Thus, while solidarity can more easily be promoted when talking about the causes of crisis, the actual implementation of solidarity when it comes to integrating them is a more contested topic. Finally, claims discussing civil society and citizens' activities and volunteering were overwhelmingly positive, highlighting the pro-solidarity role of such actors, which often compensated for shortcomings of authorities struggling with a massively increased workload. Claims were made as political decisions (17.7%), direct solidarity actions and humanitarian aid (7.5%), protest actions (10.4%) and verbal statements (64.4%). Looking at political actors, meaning any representative of a state-like institution (e.g., chancellor, mayor, UN secretary general, EU commissioner or MP), verbal statements were by far the most prominent form of claiming. This highlights the strong emphasis of political debate amongst politicians dealing with the 'crisis' (Table 2 and Figure 6). In contrast, other actors (i.e., non-political ones) show a more balanced picture, using different kinds of claim forms to enter the discussion. Patterns in this respect are very homogeneous across countries and do not differ much. They also suggest, however, that civil society actors become visible in the public sphere rather by mobilizing than by 'only' making verbal statements.

Pro-solidarity claims mostly built on justifications referring to human rights or equality. Justifications that revealed a more rationally driven perspective or such that made reference to identity-related aspects such as nationalism were very often more negative. For a majority of claims, no justification was coded (Figure 7).

## Confronting Solidarity Claims: Bottom-up Opposition on Social Media

The debate unfolding on Facebook in September 2015 does not mirror discussions about 'uncivil' hate speech or filter bubbles. Quite the contrary: Confronting claims, Facebook users directly respond to views communicated in news media. However, comments follow a dynamic of backlash: Positive claims are met by negative comments and vice versa and thus seem to balance the (non-)solidarity dynamics that dominate the mainstream discourse in the news media.

A large number of Facebook comments referred to claims or issues discussed in the articles under which they were posted. A smaller proportion of comments made a contribution to the wider debate without responding directly (Figure 10). In addition, commenters often raised claims of their own (over 80% of comments). This suggests that the bottom-up responses by commenters are mostly in tune with the top-down communication as found in newspaper articles. Accordingly, issue patterns are also mirrored in comments, again highlighting the saliency of migration management as a matter of contestation (Figure 8). This goes against the image of 'uncivil' hate speech or filter bubbles that is often discussed when it comes to social media. Qualifying this finding, however, we need to take into account that we coded the most commented articles and the liked comments and that newspapers moderate the discussion unfolding on their Facebook pages, deleting, for example, offensive or discriminating contents.

Comments were on average more negative than the claims. Here, an interesting pattern of 'backlash' emerged in almost all countries. In Poland, for example, where claims coded in newspaper articles were rather positive, comments were rather negative. The only country in which this dynamic did not occur was Greece; here, however, claims were very polarized and evaluative whereas comments were often more neutral, which could be interpreted as another form of backlash (Table 4).

Thus, it seems that the more positive the claims were, the more negatively commenters responded. This can be interpreted as an expression of criticism and distrust regarding the mostly political representatives that were visible with their claims. Responding to this, if at all, commenters mostly called for political decisions. Overall, however, 73% of claims did not contain a call for action at all (Table 3).

Justifications in comments mainly referred to human rights, religious duties and historical reasons. Interestingly, anti-solidarity attitudes were justified more often than pro-solidarity claims, suggesting that, in times of crisis, being pro-refugee is regarded as 'natural' and not in need of justification (Figure 9). Thus, aspects of social desirability bias attitudes being against refugees needs a justification while being for it does not. Overall, our analysis shows an image of Facebook as a forum for the contestation of mainstream discourses. Earlier research has emphasised that Facebook comments should not be seen as representative of public opinion. However, our results, coming from an analysis of the most popular articles and comments, suggests that we may want to look further into this to gain a better understanding of under which circumstances comments may be more or less representative. This should also be connected to the moderation policies of account holders, which can influence how such debates evolve.

## Lessons to be Drawn

Politicians and stakeholders do in fact dominate the public debate about solidarity with refugees and thus have greater influence, but also greater responsibility regarding the unfolding of the debate. The European Momentum of solidarity in September 2015 was lost since politicians focused on migration management and arising problems rather than offering a vision or a solidarity narrative for society to orient itself towards. They did not succeed in convincing citizens that times of crisis may require a redefinition of comfort zones and an overcoming of anxieties for the gain of solidarity with those in dire need of it. Taking literally the principle of solidarity, which the European Union has vowed to uphold, there is much room for improvement.

In September 2015, the Welcoming Culture represented by civil society actors and citizens seemed to be the dominant narrative, which was pushed back by the political discourse on management and problems. At this point, civil society actors or non-political representatives more generally had a harder time entering the discussion. This, however, may contribute to unnecessarily increasing the negative perception of crisis, also suggesting that people have to wait and rely on politicians to make it right and that they cannot change anything themselves. Taking the famous 'Welcoming Culture' in Germany as an example, it is important to demonstrate how citizens can

get involved and how they can help to promote solidarity with those that need it.

In a similar vein, our findings show a very negative bias regarding the solidarity discussion regarding refugees, especially by political actors. Research on media effects has shown how media contents on migration and refugees can help foster undemocratic values and the rise of extreme parties. In this respect, politicians – and also the media – contribute to eroding the social cohesion of societies by promoting inequality. However, as seen in the backlash dynamics of Facebook comments, people may perceive a too positive discourse as cynical and not responding to their insecurities, reacting with more negative attitudes. Against this background, politicians and the media are urged to live up to their responsibilities and work towards a balanced discourse, discussing topics in an accessible and factual way without stigmatising groups of people thereby furthering the anxieties arising in a crisis.

Regarding the dynamics on Facebook in particular, our results do not show ‘uncivil’ discussions in social media or a reluctance of users to engage with opinions that do not correspond with their own. In contrast, commenters oftentimes directly respond to claims or to issues raised in the articles. Thus, while we did not look at comments in connection to direct replies, users are responsive, which might be a feature that could be focused upon to a greater degree. Furthermore, the interactivity on social media (for example, the discussions between the owners of a Facebook account and commenters) is currently underexploited as a research topic. Politicians should therefore not be afraid or hesitant to engage in direct conversation with commenters.

Another reason why social media strategies should be designed in a more interactive way is that the reactivity of commenters might be used by such people trying to agitate and mobilise against refugees. Thus, promoters of solidarity should not leave the field to anti-solidarity forces. Especially political actors more in favour of refugees should increase their efforts to gain (social) media saliency and also enforce moderation policies to foster a ‘civil’ debate. In particular, by focusing on pro-solidarity strategies, claimants might be able to steer social media debates, contributing to a balanced discourse of solidarity with refugees.

Politicians should maintain a voice of solidarity and not give in to opportunism regarding short-term media and public attention. They should publicly support the causes of civil society, or in-

clude them in their claims and activities. This may help not only to motivate citizens to join others and get engaged but also to promote solidarity by giving promoters a voice. In the long run, this could also help to reduce general anxieties and foster the social cohesion of society as such.

## Research Parameters

TransSOL is an EU-funded research project dedicated to describing and analysing solidarity initiatives and practices at a time in which the EU’s existence is challenged by the consequences of the 2008 economic and financial crisis, by the management of so called ‘refugee crisis’, and by the outcome of the 2017 Brexit referendum. The fifth work package of TransSOL systematically investigated print and social media contents, analysing collective identities and solidarity in the public sphere with an explicit focus on the ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015/2016. The aim was to understand dynamics and patterns of the contestation of solidarity with refugees across eight countries, considering the discourse in the mainstream media as well as responses to the mainstream discourse manifested in social media user comments. More specifically, we relied on the established method of claims-making analysis in the three largest newspapers in Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and the United Kingdom and the five largest newspapers in Switzerland. In addition, we looked at each respective newspaper’s Facebook page, and analysed the most ‘liked’ user comments posted under the most commented articles.

As claims, we defined an intervention, verbal or nonverbal, made in the public space by any actor (including individuals who engage in acts of solidarity), which bore on the interests, needs or rights of refugees. Solidarity claims are given expression in a way that these interests, needs or rights of refugees are strengthened, affirmed or supported or, in contrast, rejected, weakened or disapproved of. Overall, we coded around 700 claims per country, resulting in a total of 6093 claims, in addition to 300 comments per country (2400). While both types of data, claims and comments, can be studied independently, the structure of our dataset also allows for connecting the two, enabling researchers to directly confront claims in newspapers with the comments they received.

The claims analysis had several central variables: the claimant (e.g., the prime minister), the form of the claim (e.g., a speech in parliament), the issue (e.g., border management), the position towards refugees (e.g., positive or negative), and the underlying justification (e.g., relating to pragmatic interests). In addition, addressees that were called upon for action were coded. In addition, we also coded actors that were blamed or credited. Finally, we also coded the scopes and nationalities of all actors involved in the claim. The comments analysis followed very similar patterns, as we also allowed for coding claims within comments. Other comment features were captured by asking

about the reference of the comment: Did it refer to the article under which it was posted or to a claim raised in it? Or did it just make a statement as a contribution to the broader debate about the refugee crisis? The reliability of these variables was tested extensively in several tests, probing reliability within national teams and between the eight teams involved. While some variables were found to be more problematic than others, the work package leaders managed to train coders to a degree that allows us to use the database for reliable inferences about the state of solidarity with refugees in the public sphere.

## Annex:

Figure 1: Distribution of Newspaper Solidarity Claims over Time

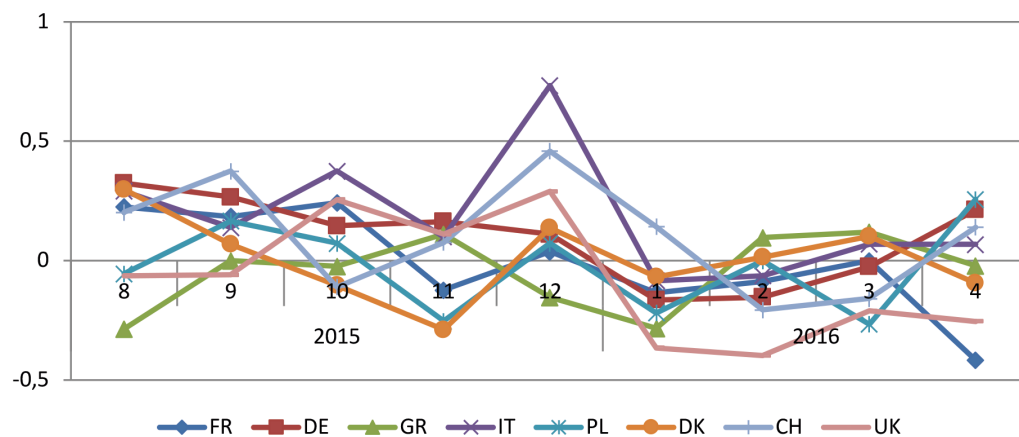


Figure 2: Average Position of Political and Non-Political Actors over Time

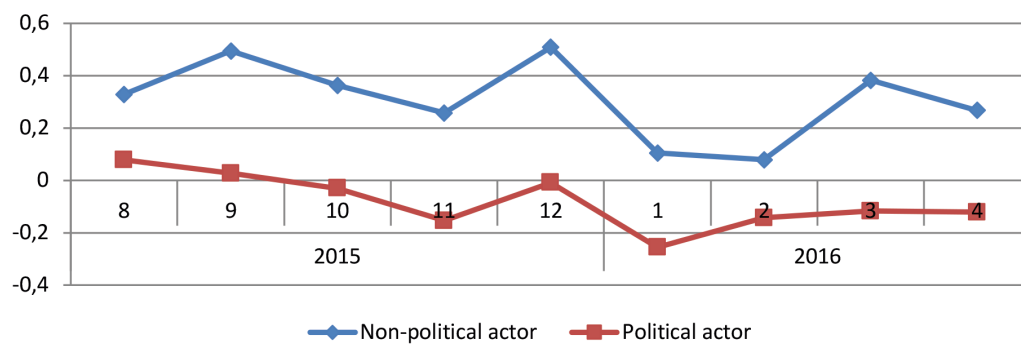


Figure 3: Average Position of Claimants by their Scope

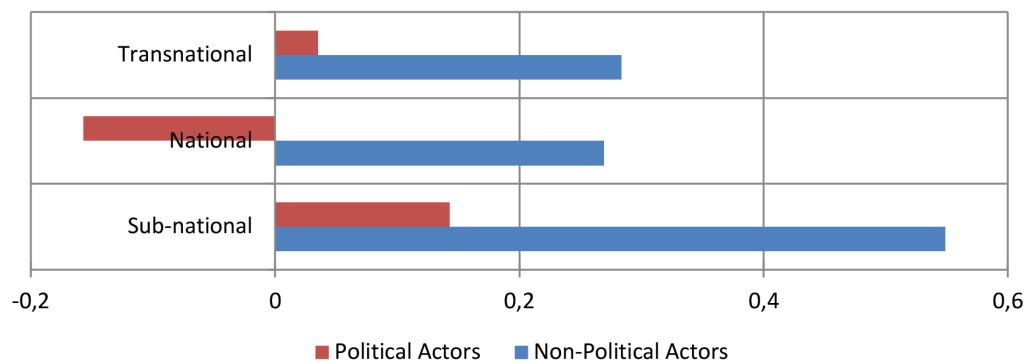


Figure 4: Average Position of Actors by Claimants' Nationality

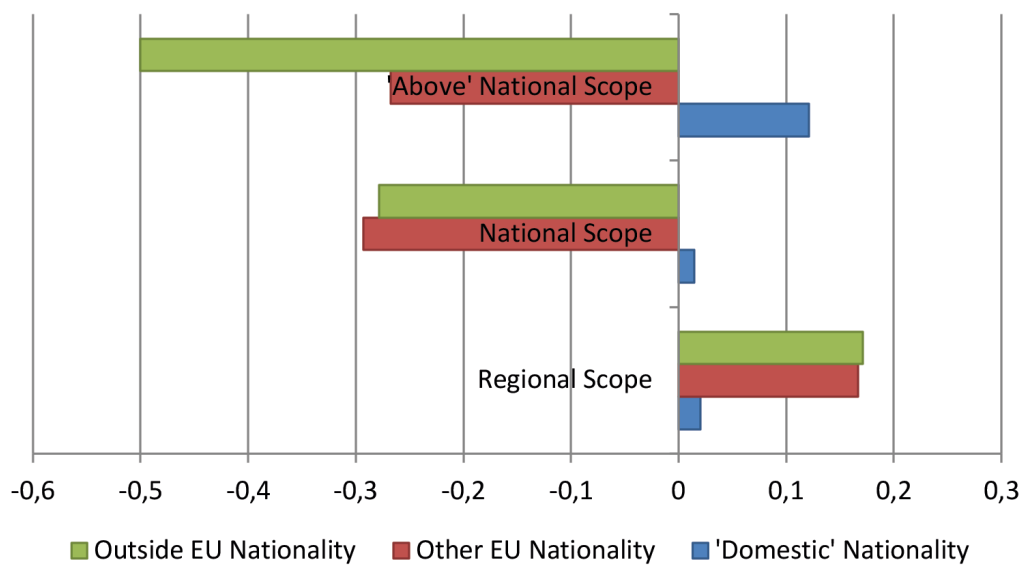




Figure 5: Average Position by Issues discussed in Solidarity Claims across Countries

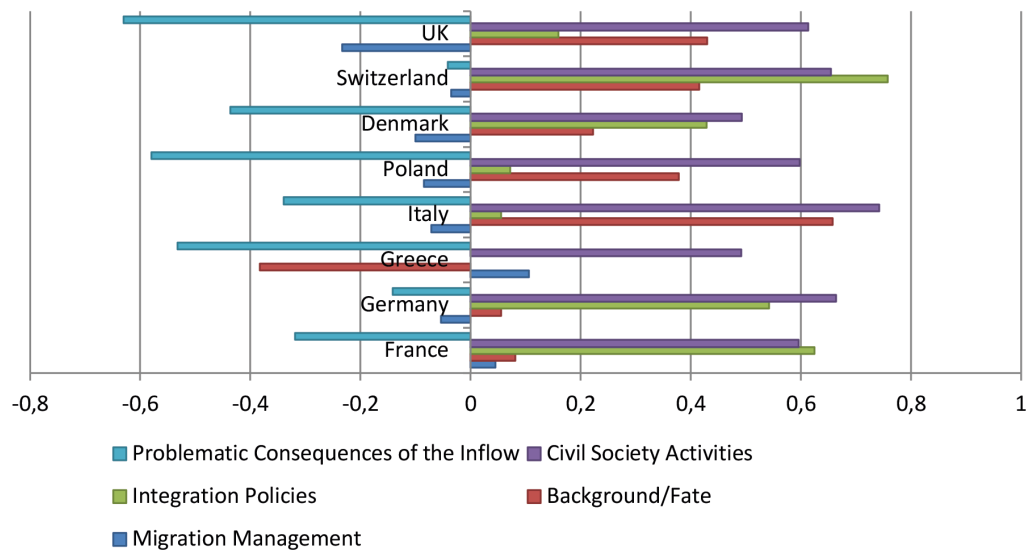


Figure 6: Forms of Action by Political/Non-Political Actors and Country in Newspaper Claims

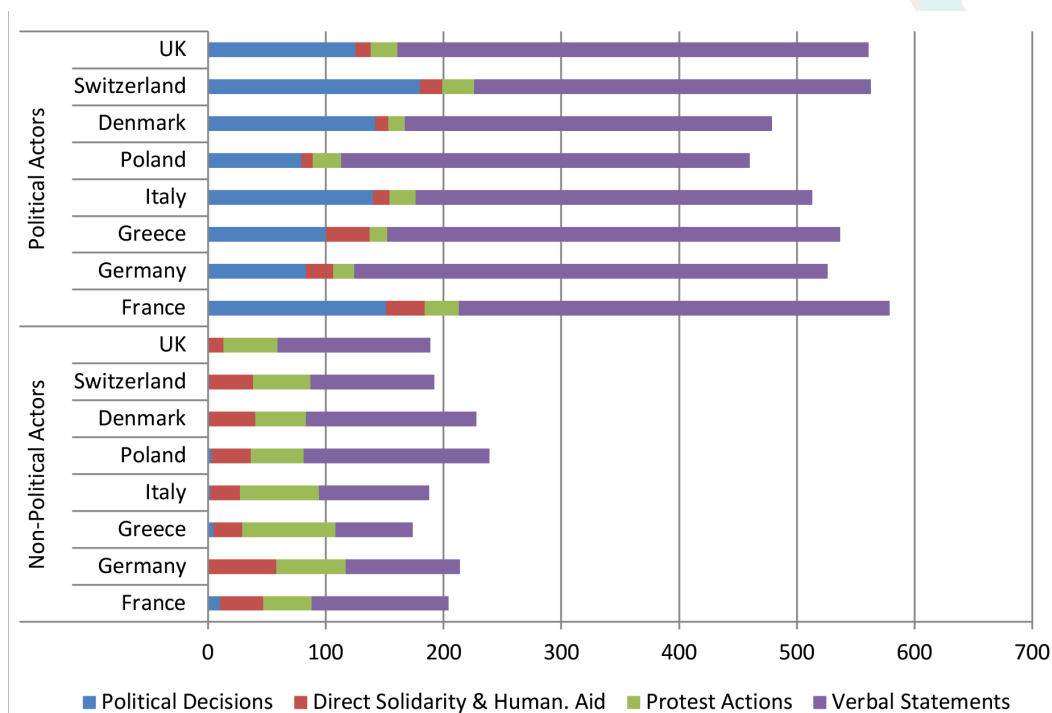




Figure 7: Underlying Justifications of Newspaper Claims and Their Average Position

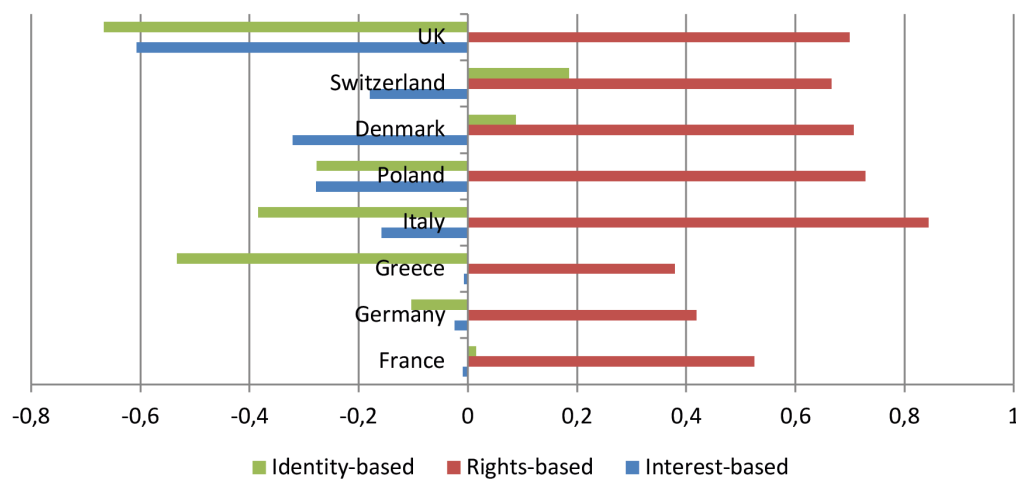


Figure 8: Comparison of Discussed Issues in Newspaper Claims and Comments

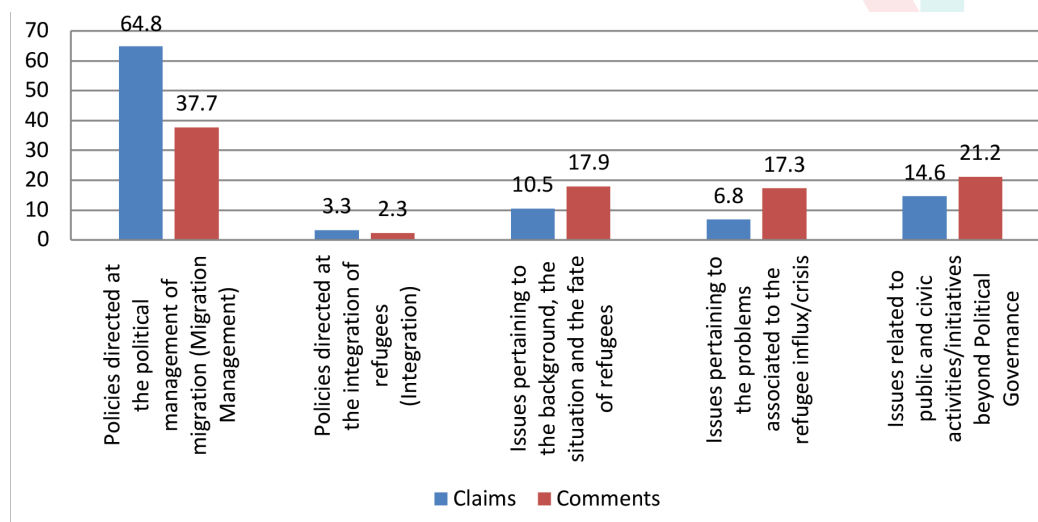


Figure 9: Tonality of Comments with and without Justification

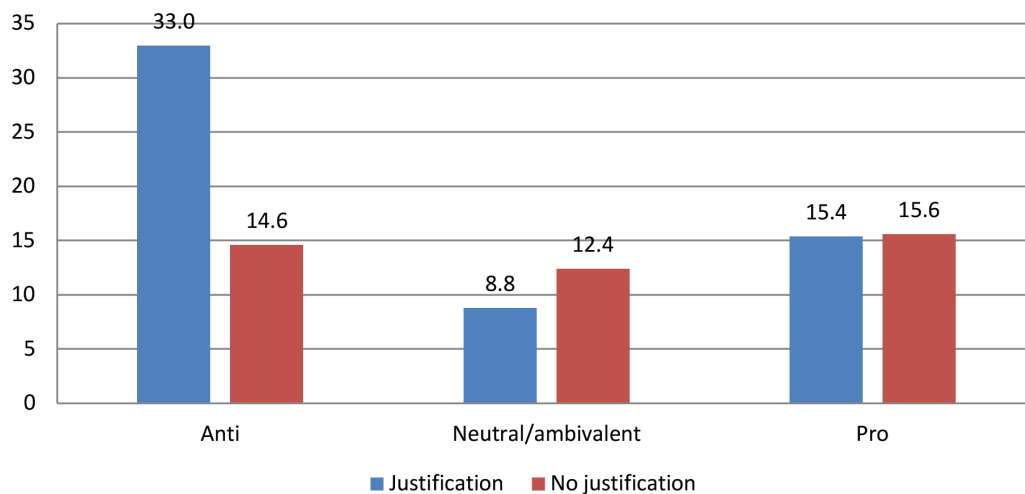
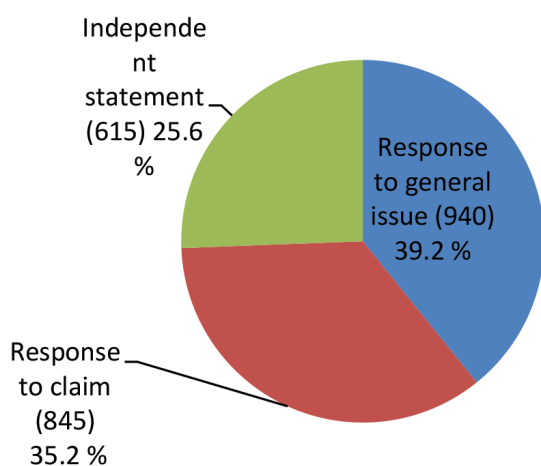


Figure 10: Shares of Different Types of Comments



**Table 1: Calls for Action communicated in Comments**

	Policy/ legal action	Direct solidar ity	Humanit arian aid mobilisa tion	Protes t actions	Repressive measures	Online mobilisatio n	Other	No CfActio n	Total
France	30.7%	2.6%	0.7%	1.8%	0.0%	9.1%	0.4%	54.7%	100%
Germany	10.9%	3.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%	5.5%	79.6%	100%
Greece	4.3%	1.4%	0.0%	1.1%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	92.8%	100%
Italy	3.3%	8.8%	0.4%	0.0%	0.8%	0.0%	20.5%	66.1%	100%
Poland	8.4%	1.7%	0.0%	0.4%	0.8%	0.0%	3.8%	84.9%	100%
Denmark	17.2%	6.0%	0.0%	0.4%	1.7%	0.0%	8.2%	66.4%	100%
Switzerland	16.7%	4.4%	0.7%	0.3%	0.7%	0.0%	4.8%	72.4%	100%
UK	22.7%	5.4%	0.4%	0.4%	0.0%	1.5%	4.2%	65.4%	100%
Total	14.6%	4.2%	0.3%	0.6%	0.5%	1.5%	5.7%	72.6%	100%

**Table 2: Issues of claims about the 'refugee crisis' by country (percentages)**

	Migration management	Integration	Background of refugees	Consequences of refugee crisis	Public/civic initiatives	Total
France	64.9%	5.2%	10.9%	11.9%	7.1%	100.0%
Germany	49.9%	8%	12.3%	16.2%	13.6%	100.0%
Greece	66.1%	2.9%	11.6%	11%	8.4%	100.0%
Italy	65.5%	2.6%	15.4%	7.1%	9.4%	100.0%
Poland	62.4%	4%	10.6%	9.9%	13.1%	100.0%
Denmark	66.5%	8.9%	7.6%	7.8%	9.2%	100.0%
Switzerland	66.1%	4.2%	8.4%	6%	15.3%	100.0%
Great Britain	68.1%	3.2%	15.9%	8.6%	4.2%	100.0%
Total	63.7%	4.9%	11.6%	9.8%	10%	100.0%

**Table 3: Forms of newspaper claims about the refugee crisis by country (percentages)**

	Political decisions	Direct Solidarity + Humanitarian Aid	Protest actions	Verbal statements	Unknown	Total
France	21.4%	9.5%	8.9%	59.9%	0.3%	100.0%
Germany	11.2%	11%	10.4%	67.4%	0.0%	100.0%
Greece	15%	9.1%	13.9%	61.9%	0.0%	100.0%
Italy	20.3%	5.6%	12.7%	61.5%	0.0%	100.0%
Poland	11.8%	6.1%	9.8%	72.2%	0.0%	100.0%
Denmark	20.3%	7.1%	8.1%	64.6%	0.0%	100.0%
Switzerland	24.4%	8.3%	9.7%	57.7%	0.0%	100.0%
Great Britain	16.8%	3.4%	9.4%	70.4%	0.0%	100.0%
Total	17.7%	7.5%	10.4%	64.4%	0.0%	100.0%

**Table 4: Shares of Online Claims and Comments by Tonality**

	Claims in newspapers			Comments		
	Anti	Neutral	Pro	Anti	Neutral	Pro
France	28.5%	24.5%	47%	53.3%	26.3%	20.4%
Germany	22.6%	28.2%	49.2%	55.2%	21.4%	23.4%
Greece	41.5%	17%	41.5%	24.6%	42%	33.3%
Italy	31.9%	22.3%	45.8%	27.6%	23%	49.4%
Poland	27.2%	29%	43.8%	75.3%	15.9%	8.8%
Denmark	39.3%	14.5	46.2%	47.4%	12.9%	39.7%
Switzerland	24%	14.4%	61.6%	48.8%	16.4%	34.8%
UK	40.7%	24.6%	34.7%	52.3%	10%	37.7%
Total	30.7%	22.3%	47%	47.7%	21.3%	31.1%

**The full report can be read at:**

[www.transsol.eu/outputs/reports](http://www.transsol.eu/outputs/reports)

## Project Identity

### Consortium:

European Alternatives

Glasgow Caledonian University  
Yunus Centre for Social Business and Health

University of Copenhagen  
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Department of Sociology

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Department of Legal Sciences

University of Geneva  
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University of Sheffield  
Department of Politics

University of Siegen  
Centre for Research in the Social Sciences

University of Warsaw  
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**Further information on the TransSOL-project  
is available at:**

[www.transsol.eu](http://www.transsol.eu)

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