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# Political migration discourses on social media: a comparative perspective on visibility and sentiment across political Facebook accounts in Europe

Tobias Heidenreich, Jakob-Moritz Eberl, Fabienne Lind and Hajo Boomgaarden 

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## ABSTRACT

Migration has been dominating media and political discourses in Europe in recent years. Previous studies have mainly mapped migration discourses in traditional media or conventional channels of party communication, often in a single country. Migration-related party communication on social network sites has been largely neglected. This study analyses migration discourses in the Facebook accounts of political actors ( $n = 1702$ ) across six European countries (Spain, UK, Germany, Austria, Sweden and Poland). On the basis of automated content analyses, we present new insights into the visibility of migration as a topic and sentiment about migration, revealing country- and party-specific patterns. Migration is a more prominent topic in countries with positive net migration ('receiving countries') than in countries where net migration is neutral or negative. Although we did not find support for the assumption that right-leaning parties talk more, and more negatively, about migration, our results do suggest a distinct pattern that applies to parties of both the extreme left and the extreme right. Political actors from parties of the extreme left and the extreme right of the political spectrum address migration more frequently and more negatively than more moderate political players.

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## KEYWORDS

Migration; social media; Facebook; automated content analysis; comparative; political communication

## 1. Introduction

Migration has become an increasingly important topic in many Western democracies in recent years, and at times it has been the subject of heated public and political debate. In 2015, in particular, increased immigration to the European Union, which received more than 1.3 million asylum applications (UNHCR 2017), led to heightened public attention to migration and, arguably, to a surge in support for populist, right-wing parties and to subsequent electoral success; some even entered government (e.g. Burscher, van Spanje, and de Vreese 2015). The peak in refugee arrivals was followed by massive attention from media and political actors, which persists to this day, illustrating the importance

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and societal relevance of the topic. Mass media play a central role in providing information about migration to the wider public. Given that both the amount of attention the migration issue receives and the ways in which it is debated in the public sphere can affect perceptions and public opinion (e.g. Aalberg, Iyengar, and Messing 2012; Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2009), it is no surprise that recent years have seen the publication of a large number of media content studies focusing on the topic of migration (see Eberl et al. 2018 for an overview).

Most previous studies have considered migration-related discourses in print or on television (e.g. Branton and Dunaway 2008; Igartua et al. 2014; Lawlor 2015; Vliegenthart and Boomgaarden 2007) and few analyses have addressed the topic of migration in unmediated party communication, that is, in communication coming directly from political actors, such as speeches or press releases (e.g. Charteris-Black 2006), and party communication on social networking sites (SNS) has been almost totally neglected (for an exception see Bennett 2018). However, SNS constitute an important source of statements from political actors and that can be used to study their communication with constituents and the wider electorate (Robertson, Vatrappu, and Medina 2010). Whilst traditional news coverage conveys information and opinions, re-interpreted and filtered by journalists according to journalistic criteria, to a diffuse readership, party communications transfer information and opinion directly to a specific group of people, who have actively chosen to receive such information. An increasing proportion of people are using such platforms (e.g. Newman et al. 2017); use of such platforms by political actors has increased (e.g. Bruns et al. 2015) and up to 42 percent of the European population follows at least one politician on social media (Newman et al. 2017). SNS can therefore be seen as a vital channel for communicating political information to citizens and shaping public opinion. Given that the migration debate definitely was – and in a lot of countries still is – highly ‘mediatised’ (Bennett 2018), it is likely that citizens are seeking additional information on social media.

The refugee crisis shifted migration discourses (at least in part) from the national to the transnational (i.e. the European Union) level and is of relevance to political parties across the ideological spectrum. Most previous research, however, investigated migration discourses within single countries. Studies comparing the discourses of different countries are scarce (Eberl et al. 2018). A country-comparative perspective may help to elucidate country-specific differences and provide a more holistic picture of European party discourses about migration.

Given the importance of the topic of migration, the growing impact of SNS and the distinct shortcomings of the existing literature, it is critical that a comparative analysis of migration-related discourses on SNS is carried out. This study therefore investigates political actors’ communication on Facebook in order to unveil discursive the characteristics of particular countries and political groupings. It was guided by the question: *What is the nature of migration discourses on European politicians’ Facebook accounts and how do these discourses vary with country and ideological bent?*

This question was addressed by analysing a dataset of 743,070 status posts from the Facebook accounts of 1702 politicians in six European countries (Spain, UK, Germany, Austria, Sweden and Poland). Facebook is the world’s largest SNS and known to be a hotspot for political discussions (e.g. Kushin and Kitchener 2009). This study used automated content analysis techniques to investigate party communication during the two and

a half year period from June 2015, and thus covers the height of the so-called European refugee crisis and its aftermath.

## 2. Visibility of migration and sentiment towards it in public discourses

Studies mapping migration discourses in the public sphere frequently focus on two concepts. First, following agenda-setting theory (McCombs 2005), they reveal the *visibility* of migration generally, or specific aspects of migration and migrants, i.e. how much attention is given to these topics, which is frequently operationalised as the volume (e.g. Akkerman 2011) or intensity (e.g. Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2009) of migration-related communication. A variety of studies have confirmed that the visibility of migration-related media coverage influences associated perceptions (Jacobs and Hooghe 2015), attitudes (Van Klingeren et al. 2015), and even behaviour (Koopmans 1996). Second, whilst visibility is a purely quantitative parameter of textual content, *how* migration is talked about – the quality of discourse – is also important. Hence scholars have used notions such as valence frames (e.g. De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2003) to examine how a topic or actors are depicted in discourses by capturing the *sentiment* or *tone* of textual resources (e.g. Caviedes 2015). Automated procedures can be used to evaluate the valence (i.e. positive, neutral, negative) of whole messages, sentences or words and label them with a sentiment score (e.g. Lawlor 2015). Valenced messages may simplify complex issues and alter attitudes or, in the case of political information, voting behaviour (Eberl, Boomgaarden, and Wagner 2017; Valentino, Buhr, and Beckmann 2001). Bizer, Larsen, and Petty (2011) showed that valenced frames may influence attitude strength by affecting people's certainty about a particular issue. Furthermore, especially negative content is known to affect reactions, as well as subsequent decisions (Soroka, Young, and Balmas 2015). Schemer (2014), moreover, found that statements towards refugees or immigrants that had an overall negative tone increased xenophobia. In short, the visibility of migration and the tone in which it is discussed in political and public discourse are of great importance as they may influence public opinion on migration and migrants (e.g. Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2009; Van Klingeren et al. 2015).

Most of the studies presented above provide insight into the effects of traditional media content, but given the interdependence of old and new media, similar effects are to be expected in hybrid media systems (Chadwick 2017). Research has shown that the content of traditional media coverage and party communication may be related (Vliegenthart and Roggeband 2007), so we argue that users on SNS process information from different sources, e.g. traditional media or political actors, in parallel, making SNS personalised media environments worth studying in more detail (Kim, Chen, and De Zúñiga 2013).

### 2.1. Variation across countries

The visibility of migration in traditional media has been shown to be tied to real-world events such as terrorist attacks or publication of migration statistics (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2009; Kroon et al. 2016; Vliegenthart and Boomgaarden 2007; cf. Jacobs et al. 2018). Should the dynamics of visibility be similar on social media one would expect migration to be more prominent in party communications on social media in

countries that are more strongly affected by real world-events related to migration. These countries may experience the consequences of immigration such as difficulties regarding integration or increased pressure on the labour market (Ruhs 2017) more intensely, hence their political discourse might place more emphasis on migration than in countries less affected by recent migration.

In fact, research has shown that categorising countries based on their migration statistics can be useful when studying migration discourse in traditional media (see Balabanova and Balch 2010). A common distinction is that between ‘receiving’ and ‘non-receiving’ countries. In receiving countries the net migration rate is positive (i.e. the number of immigrants exceeds the number of emigrants). In non-receiving countries net migration is either negative (i.e. the number of emigrants exceeds the number of immigrants) or close to zero (i.e. immigration and emigration approximately cancel each other out). In summary, as receiving countries face different challenges in the following the recent wave of immigration, *we expected to find that politicians in receiving countries address the topic of migration more often on Facebook than politicians in non-receiving countries (H1).*

Most studies investigating the public sentiment in migration discourses across countries have focused on media coverage and found that overall, the negative aspects are given greater weight than the positive aspects (e.g. Jacobs 2017; Philo, Briant, and Donald 2013). Overall perceptions of migration are negative at a global level, and particularly in Europe, where immigrants are frequently portrayed in an unfavourable light, as dangerous or a threat to the society in general (Breen, Devereux, and Haynes 2006; Rasinger 2010; Strömbäck, Andersson, and Nedlund 2017). This also holds true for the depiction of migrants by politicians. In Australia, for example, Klocker and Dunn (2003) showed that in press releases politicians invariably described migrant actors in critical, negative terms.

Nevertheless, whether the depiction of migration and sentiment towards migration vary systematically across Europe remains an open question. We have therefore categorised countries as receiving or non-receiving. Whilst discourse in both types of country tends to focus on macroeconomic outcomes, the former may emphasise the consequences of migration for the receiving nation, whereas in non-receiving countries the humanitarian aspects may feature more frequently (Balabanova and Balch 2010). Amongst the consequences of migration that have attracted attention in receiving countries is the impact on welfare systems, for example tension may arise around immigrants’ access to social benefits (Ruhs 2013). Moreover, immigrants from other European countries are frequently seen as competitors in the labour market and in consequence, receiving countries are increasingly calling for further restrictions on economic migrants’ access to welfare benefits (Ruhs 2017). Altogether, it is safe to assume that political actors in receiving countries discuss migration in more negative terms than those in countries less affected by migration. *Hence, we expected politicians in receiving countries to address the topic of migration on Facebook more negatively than politicians in non-receiving countries (H2).*

## 2.2. Variation across parties

The composition of political camps and national parliaments has also been shown to affect migration discourse (e.g. Mudde 2007). One explanation for differences in the prominence

of migration in public discourse may be found at party level, more precisely in the varying political leanings of political parties that constitute these camps and parliament. Right-wing parties make migration central to their primary political appeal and advocate more restrictive and monocultural migration policies than left-wing parties (Van Heerden et al. 2014). In accordance with issue ownership theory right-wing parties, with their clear anti-immigration stance, are more strongly associated with the topic of migration (e.g. Walgrave and De Swert 2004) and have an especially strong interest in the high visibility of the topic in public discourse. Stier et al. (2017) also show that the German party AfD, a right-wing party, strongly emphasised multiple migration-related topics (e.g. aspects of refugee policy) in their Facebook party communication. In summary, *we expected right-wing parties to address the topic of migration more often on Facebook than centrist or left-wing parties (H3).*

As well as hypothesising that migration is more visible in the discourse of right-wing political actors, we also argue that right-wing actors use particularly negative frames and language to discuss migration, because anti-immigrant views are characteristic of such parties (Mudde 2007). In line with welfare chauvinist claims, right-wing parties pursue a discursive strategy of positive self- and negative other-presentation (Wodak 2015). As well as pushing the migration debate to the core of European political discourse, in recent decades right-wing parties have succeeded in tying the issue to cultural (Yilmaz 2012) and security threats (Liang 2016). They employ negative expressions, for example using natural disasters as a metaphor, in order to provoke fear and anger towards immigrant groups (Charteris-Black 2006). A study in Switzerland (Schemer 2012) confirmed that the populist right portrayed immigrants in a negative way and alleged they would ‘swamp’ the country. The right-wing Belgian party ‘Vlaams Blok’ has also pursued a strategy of excluding, stigmatising and blaming immigrants (Jagers and Walgrave 2007). These negative depictions of migrants as a threat have been accompanied by right-wing parties’ calls for better internal security, closed borders and strict controls on immigration (e.g. Schemer 2012). *We therefore expected right-wing parties to address the topic of migration on Facebook more negatively than centrist or left-wing parties (H4).*

### 3. Data & methods

We tested our hypotheses by analysing the Facebook accounts of members of the national parliaments (MPs) of Spain, the UK, Germany, Austria, Sweden and Poland as of November 2017. This selection of countries should be representative of the range of migration discourse on SNS across Europe, given that it comprises a Southern European country, Western, Northern and Central European countries that received high numbers of refugees in 2015, and an Eastern European country. The UK is a special case, as the 2016 Brexit referendum was strongly driven by anti-immigration arguments (Hobolt 2016). We categorised countries on the basis of Eurostat data (2018): those with a positive net migration rate were categorised as ‘receiving’ (UK, Germany, Austria, and Sweden) and those with a negative or negligible net migration rate as ‘non-receiving’ (Spain and Poland).

To identify relevant political actors from these countries, we started by scraping lists of MPs from official websites and then searched for Facebook accounts in these names. After human verification checks<sup>1</sup> we ended up with  $n = 1702$  Facebook profiles (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Verified Facebook accounts.

Country	Members of parliament	No. with a verified Facebook accounts	Percentage with a verified Facebook account
Spain	349	120	34%
UK	650	559	86%
Germany	709	559	79%
Austria	183	97	53%
Sweden	349	126	36%
Poland	460	241	52%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2700</b>	<b>1702</b>	<b>63%</b>

To investigate these accounts further, we downloaded posts containing textual data that were published between 1st of June, 2015 and 31st of December, 2017 and the corresponding meta-information. This time span was chosen because it gave a good cross-section of political migration discourses on Facebook, starting at the height of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015 and capturing the aftermath. The Graph API (application programming interface) was accessed with a Python script to retrieve the data. Using this procedure we collected 748,071 status posts made by the aforementioned politicians.<sup>2</sup>

Further analyses were based on data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Polk et al. 2017), which assigned parties an ideological score ranging from extreme left (0) to extreme right (10). We were unable to obtain ideological scores for a few smaller parties and independent MPs and we decided to exclude these from the analysis,<sup>3</sup> leading to a final dataset of  $n = 743,192$  status posts. We then used the Python package ‘polyglot’ for multilingual text processing to implement common data cleaning procedures (Al-Rfou et al. 2015).

### 3.1. Measuring the visibility of migration discourses on Facebook

To identify relevant Facebook posts (i.e. posts related to migration) we relied on country- and language-specific search strings<sup>4</sup> that were constructed and validated as part of a larger comparative project. The multilingual search strings were constructed in two stages. First, relevant search terms were collected from previous studies of texts on migration (e.g. Lawlor 2015; Vliegthart and Boomgaarden 2007). Second, we enriched this list with terms from country-specific or European-level contexts (Lind, Eberl, Heidenreich, and Boomgaarden 2019). We were assisted in the identification and translation of search terms by native speakers from the countries concerned.<sup>5</sup>

The search strings were compiled into regular expressions using the programming language Python and included both full form and wildcard searches depending on the structure and complexity of the language.<sup>6</sup> To identify the keywords within Facebook posts, we broke the latter down into single words (i.e. tokens) which were then tagged related or unrelated to migration (1 or 0). The same native speakers who helped with the search string construction then validated the search strings on language-specific text corpora ( $n = 9369$ ). Both *Recall* ( $\bar{R}$  0.81) and *Precision* ( $\bar{P}$  0.85) reached satisfactory levels, indicating the validity of our multilingual search strings as a means of identifying migration-related texts.<sup>7</sup>

The identification of migration related posts served two purposes. First, it enabled us to measure the visibility of migration in party communication on Facebook. We calculated



the number of posts relating to migration by each party relative all other posts by the party concerned. Second, it enabled us to segregate the data on migration-related posts for further analyses (i.e. sentiment). We initially identified 24,691 migration-related status posts, but to avoid distorting subsequent analyses by including small groups, we removed all parties with less than 40 migration-related posts.<sup>8</sup> This yielded a final total of  $n = 24,578$  status posts mentioning at least one aspect of migration.

### 3.2. Measuring the sentiment of migration discourse on Facebook

We used a dictionary-based approach to quantify sentiment, based on counting valenced keywords in each status post. The challenges faced by comparative studies when it comes to automated sentiment analysis are the low availability of dictionaries in other languages than English and the comparability of available analytical resources. Hence, we decided to machine translate the whole corpus (i.e. all migration-related status posts) into one English and then use a single-language dictionary (see also Balahur and Turchi 2014). Machine translation of multilingual corpora into English has been shown to be useful (e.g. De Vries, Schoonvelde, and Schumacher 2018) despite the grammatical errors that result. The bag-of-words approaches applied in this study do not consider the order of words in a document (i.e. status post), only the frequency with which specific sentiment-bearing words occur (i.e. in a 'bag'; see Lucas et al. 2015). All 24,578 previously identified status posts were translated into English using the Google Translate API.<sup>9</sup> A sample of automated translations of status posts is given in Table 2 and Table A3 in the Online Appendix provides additional examples in every language.

Although a handful of validated English sentiment dictionaries exist, such as the LIWC or SentiStrength, we decided to use Lexicoder (Young and Soroka 2012), which (1) has been internally and externally validated, (2) outperforms other sentiment dictionaries (e.g. LWIC) in the field (Young and Soroka 2012), (3) makes it feasible to deal with negations and (4) was identified as the most appropriate for political texts in a survey of analyses of sentiment in social media (Yue et al. 2019). Several empirical studies have confirmed that it is useful when analysing the sentiment of political communication (e.g. Balmas 2017; Wlezien and Soroka 2018), migration-related texts (Lawlor 2015; Lawlor and Tolley 2017) and politicians' messages posted on SNS (Murthy 2015).<sup>10</sup> The dictionary assigns sentiment scores to 4567 positive and negative words.

The text of the status posts was prepared for sentiment analysis by filtering out some of the punctuation (e.g. from abbreviations) and dealing with characters that might interfere

**Table 2.** Example translations.

Country	Source text	Translation
Spain	Insolidaridad, desunión: Europa fracasa: los gobiernos europeos no llegan a acuerdo para el reparto de refugiados.	Insolidarity, disunity: Europe fails: European governments do not reach an agreement for the distribution of refugees.
Germany	Mein gestriges Wirtshausgespräch in Hüttendorf stand ganz im Zeichen der Flüchtlings-Debatte. Für unsere CSU-Position gab es aber große Zustimmung. Schutz für Kriegsflüchtlinge, aber gerechte Verteilung auf ganz Europa. Bekämpfung von Asylmissbrauch und schnellere Verfahren. Integration derjenigen, die in Deutschland bleiben.	My yesterday's Wirtshaus Talk in Hüttendorf was all about the refugee debate. For our CSU position, however, there was great approval. Protection for war refugees, but fair distribution across Europe. Combating asylum abuse and faster procedures. Integration of those who stay in Germany.



with the analysis (e.g. square or curly braces). R and the text analysis package ‘quanteda’ (Benoit et al. 2018) were then used to analyse the sentiments appearing in the prepared text corpus. The final score for a document ( $S_i$ ) was calculating as the sum of the scores for all words bearing positive sentiment ( $P_i$ ) minus the sum of all scores from negative words ( $N_i$ ), divided by the number of words ( $W_i$ ); this indicates whether the overall tone of a post is negative or positive (e.g. Akkerman 2011; Kouloumpis, Wilson, and Moore 2011):

$$S_i = \frac{\sum P_i - \sum N_i}{\sum W_i}$$

We found that 83% of 24,578 analysed messages were not neutral or ambivalent according to the Lexicoder dictionary; 29.6% of all messages were allocated a negative sentiment score and 53.4% were allocated a positive sentiment score. The global average score, across all countries and parties, was slightly positive ( $M = .01$ ) and the median was .01, showing that the mean was not raised by a small number of messages with positive scores, rather most of the messages had positive scores.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.3. Model specifications

We examined whether the topic of migration is more visible in receiving countries using descriptive evidence combined with chi-squared tests (IV = non-receiving/receiving country and DV = migration-related (0/1)) on the post level. Also on the post level, we conducted an ANCOVA with a post-hoc test for the association of non-receiving/receiving countries and the aggregated sentiment. We thus include covariates in the analyses. Among others, we controlled for the effects of individual countries and each party (both as a set of dummies 0/1). Including year as a dummy variable (0/1) enabled us to compare the height and the aftermath of the refugee crisis. We also specified whether a party was in government or not (0/1) in a specific year (party-level variable), since this may influence the overall sentiment of their party communication. We also included vote share during the previous election, as smaller and larger parties might also differ in their level of negativity (see Haselmayer and Jenny 2017).

When testing the influence of political ideology (0–10) on the sentiment of parties’ migration discourse on Facebook (−1 to 1), we calculated linear regression models for both visibility and sentiment at party level. We also included party-level covariates, namely a dummy variable for each country (0/1) and receiving status (0/1). These analyses were also reproduced at post level (see robustness checks, p. 17).

## 4. Results

In accordance with hypothesis 1, we expected the topic of migration to be more visible in Facebook posts by politicians in receiving countries than those in non-receiving countries. Starting with some descriptive statistics, Table 3 shows that the topic of migration was least visible in Spain where just .95% of all status posts were related to migration, followed by Poland and the UK with 1.49 and 1.64%, respectively. Migration was a more frequent topic in the status posts of politicians from Sweden (4.86%), Austria (5.28%) and Germany (5.35%). Although the visibility of migration was very similar in Poland (a non-receiving

**Table 3.** Status posts related to migration.

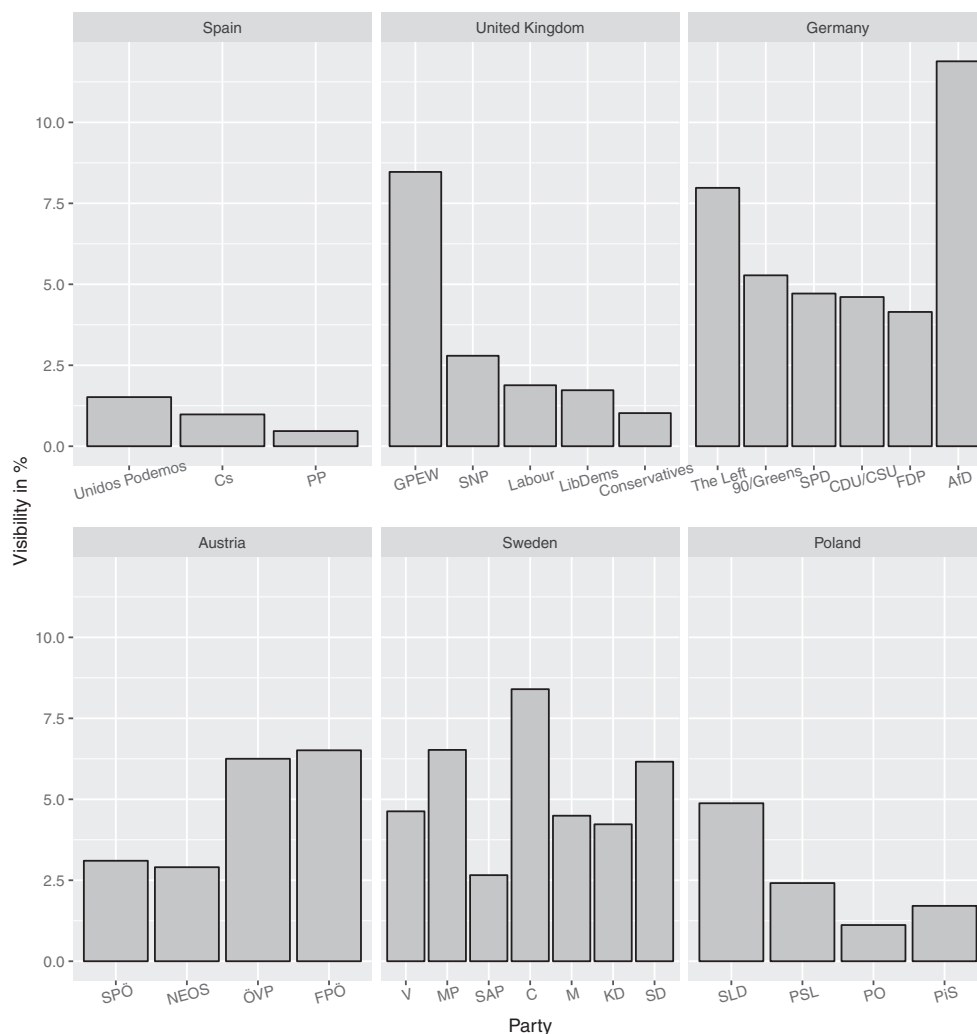
Country	Spain	UK	Germany	Austria	Sweden	Poland
Total number of status posts	46,421	220,035	286,746	44,871	24,861	102,116
Number of migration-related posts (%)	440 (.95%)	3612 (1.64%)	15,355 (5.35%)	2367 (5.28%)	1208 (4.86%)	1518 (1.49%)

country) and the UK (a receiving country), we found descriptive support for the first hypothesis, which was confirmed by Pearson's chi-squared test ( $\chi^2(1) = 2446.50$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The topic of migration was more visible in the receiving countries of Sweden, Germany and Austria, and at least slightly higher in the UK, than in the two non-receiving countries of Spain and Poland.

The second hypothesis posits that sentiment towards migration is more negative in receiving countries. The country where sentiment was most positive was Poland, a non-receiving country, with an average sentiment score of  $M = .02$  ( $SD = .06$ ), closely followed by the receiving country UK ( $M = .02$ ;  $SD = .06$ ). Sentiment was a little less positive in Germany (receiving;  $M = .02$ ;  $SD = .06$ ) and Sweden (receiving;  $M = .01$ ;  $SD = .06$ ), and was still in the positive range in Spain (non-receiving;  $M = .01$ ;  $SD = .06$ ). The only country with a negative overall sentiment score was Austria, a receiving country ( $M < -.001$ ;  $SD = .08$ ). Although variance appears to be very small given the range of the scale ( $-1$  to  $1$ ), the differences are not negligible, given that every score is standardised by message length. ANCOVA was used to assess the potential statistical difference between receiving and non-receiving countries with respect to sentiment score. When controlling for effects of country, party, year, government participation and vote share there was no group difference in sentiment ( $F(1, 24,522) = .91$ ,  $p = .34$ ), hence, the second hypothesis was rejected. Please note, however, that there were some pairwise differences between countries ( $F(4, 24,522) = 56.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ); details of these results can be found in Figure A1 in the Online Appendix.

Our third hypothesis concerned the relationship between a party's ideology and the visibility of the topic of migration in its MPs' Facebook posts. Figure 1 depicts migration-related status posts as a proportion of the total for all parties in the sample ordered by the ideological score (left to right) given in the Chapel Hill expert survey (Polk et al. 2017). We see that in Germany and Austria there is indeed descriptive evidence that parties of the right discuss migration more frequently in their Facebook status posts than other parties. Conversely, in Spain, the UK and Poland the topic tended to be more prominent in the posts of left-wing parties. At first glance, Sweden seems to be an outlier. In summary, there is no consistent overall pattern supporting the hypothesis that right-wing parties pay more attention to the topic of migration on Facebook than left-leaning parties (see Table A1 in the Online Appendix). Similarly, a linear regression that controlled for effects of country and receiving status still showed that ideological score did not linearly predict the visibility of migration in parties' social media communication (see Models 1a and 2a in Table 4).

In view of the pattern of increased visibility at both ends of the political spectrum (see left panel of Figure 2) and the fact that we did not find much support for a linear relationship between ideological position and visibility, we add a centred and squared left-right variable to the model to check for a non-linear relationship. There was an effect of the squared term ( $p < .01$ , see Models 1b and 2b in Table 4), revealing that the topic of



**Figure 1.** Migration-related status posts as a proportion of the total.

Note: Data are percentages and shown grouped by country. Parties are shown left to right in order of the Chapel Hill left-right ideological score. For an overview see Table A1 in the Appendix.

migration was more prominent in the Facebook status posts of parties at both ends of the ideological spectrum. The predicted margins are shown in the left panel of Figure 2.

With respect to the relationship between political ideology and sentiment towards migration, we expected to find that on Facebook right-wing parties addressed the topic of migration in a more negative way than left-wing parties (H4), but once again an OLS regression revealed no linear relationship between ideological score and sentiment (see Models 1a and 2a in Table 5). Nevertheless, the descriptive data were again suggestive of a non-linear relationship, instead (see distribution graph in the left panel of Figure 3), so we followed the same procedure as previously, introducing a centred and squared ideological score to the analysis. When controlling for effects of country and receiving status, sentiment was revealed to be more negative at both ends of the political spectrum

**Table 4.** Summary of regression analysis with visibility as the dependent variable.

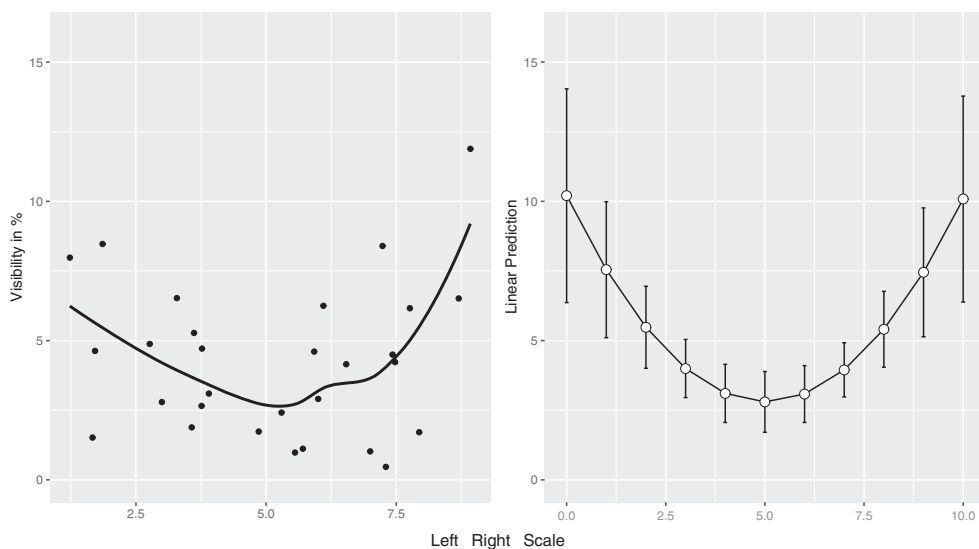
Predictor variables	Visibility ( $\beta$ )			
	Model 1a	Model 1b	Model 2a	Model 2b
Left-right score	.01	-.01	.06	.04
Squared left-right score		.49**		.52**
Country (Reference: Poland)				
Spain (0/1)	-.17	-.24		
United Kingdom (0/1)	.09	-.07		
Germany (0/1)	.59*	.48*		
Austria (0/1)	.28	.25		
Sweden (0/1)	.44 <sup>+</sup>	.34 <sup>+</sup>		
Receiving Country (0/1)			.50**	.47**
$R^2$	.25	.53	.20	.46

Notes:  $n = 29$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ , <sup>+</sup> $p < .1$ . Squared left-right score was included in the model via an interaction term (centred left-right score\*left-right score). All coefficients are standardised. The reference category for the country covariate was Poland.

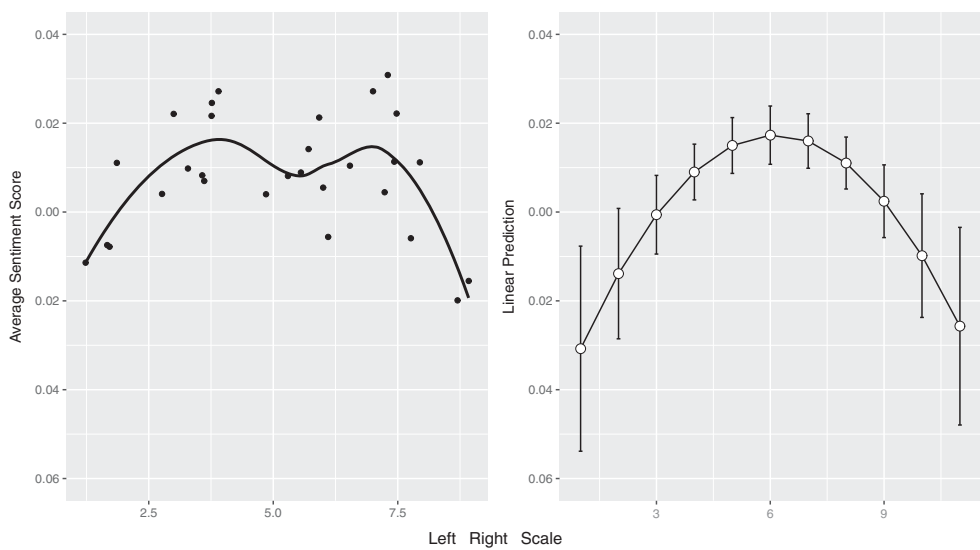
than towards the middle ( $p < .001$ ; see Models 1b and 2b in Table 5 as well as predicted margins in the right panel of Figure 3). There is further discussion of these unexpected patterns in the final section of this paper.

#### 4.1. Robustness checks

We ran several additional analyses to show that findings stay the same when the model specification was altered or different variables were included. First, we tested the relationships between migration visibility/sentiment and ideology at both the party level ( $n = 29$ ) and the post level ( $n = 728,766$ ), using a binomial logistic regression (see Table A4 and Figure A2 in the Online Appendix) and OLS ( $n = 24,578$ ; see Table A5), respectively. Second, we ran the main models from this study again, replacing ideological score with three closely related variables from the Chapel Hill dataset, namely parties' stances on

**Figure 2.** Left panel: Distribution of visibility. Right panel: Predictive margins.

Note: Visibility in percentages. Ideological score (L to R) shown on the x-axis. 95% confidence intervals on the right panel of Figure 2.



**Figure 3.** Left panel: Distribution of average sentiment scores. Right panel: Predictive margins.  
Note: Average sentiment score. Ideological score (L to R) shown on the x-axis. 95% confidence intervals on the right panel of Figure 3.

**Table 5.** Summary of regression analysis with sentiment as the dependent variable.

Predictor variables	Sentiment ( $\beta$ )			
	Model 1a	Model 1b	Model 2a	Model 2b
Left-right score	-.06	.09	-.01	.01
Squared left-right score		-.63***		-.61***
Country (Reference: Poland)				
Spain	.04	.12		
United Kingdom	.16	.19		
Germany	-.10	.04		
Austria	-.21	-.18		
Sweden	.00	.08		
Receiving Country (0/1)			-.07	-.03
$R^2$	-.16	.29	-.07	.31

Notes:  $n = 29$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Squared left-right score was included in the model via an interaction term (centred left-right score\*left-right score). All coefficients are standardised. The reference category for the country covariate was Poland.

‘immigration policy’, ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘nationalism’ (see Tables A6 to A11). All substantial results were robust to these changes.

5. Conclusion and discussion

The main purpose of this study was to contribute to the mapping of political migration discourses by investigating politicians’ Facebook communication in six European countries. Using automated content analyses we showed that politicians from receiving countries give more prominence to the topic of migration on Facebook than those from non-receiving countries. This supports our hypothesis that increased immigration and possible societal or media impacts lead to heightened attention to the topic, especially in Germany, Sweden and Austria – where a lot of migrants arrived since 2015. In contrast, the topic gets less attention in countries that are not among the top destinations for migrants (Spain and Poland). The

UK was different from other receiving countries in that political Facebook discourses did not involve migration as frequently. This is consistent with the extant literature, which frequently describes the UK as a special case when it comes to public discourse on migration (e.g. Pfetsch 2008). During our observation period, which followed the 2016 Brexit referendum, other topics, such as the likely economic consequences of leaving the European Union, may have been more important in the UK.

We did not observe a similar relationship between receiving status and sentiment towards migration in Facebook posts. Although the rate of immigration to a country affected whether its politicians address the topic, sentiment appeared to be driven by different factors. Bad economic conditions, for example, might foster hostility towards immigrants, which politicians might respond to by discussing migration in negative terms. Moreover, countries' historical background and party system might play a role in how politicians discuss migration on Facebook (Balch and Balabanova 2016). These possibilities remain to be examined in future comparative research.

Regarding the effect of political ideology, we were unable to confirm the existence of linear relationships between ideological score and either visibility or sentiment; however the results did point towards a quadratic effect. We showed that migration was more prominent in the Facebook posts of more ideologically extreme parties. Similarly, the more ideologically extreme the party according to the Chapel Hill expert survey, the more negative the sentiment of its migration-related status posts. Whilst the emphasis on migration and the negative sentiment towards it can be explained by an anti-immigrant stance in the case of right-wing parties, different factors might explain what we found for far left parties. One possibility is that extreme left parties discuss migration and opponents' migration policies in very intense and emotional terms, despite not necessarily having a negative stance towards migration themselves. This is supported by findings from political psychology, revealing that ideas and ideological beliefs differing from one's own are more easily and more intensely rejected by extreme left and right parties than more moderate parties (Van Prooijen and Krouwel 2017). Unlike more moderate parties, parties of the extreme left and right may both claim that refugee and migration policy should be very simple their proposed policies are diametrically opposed (i.e. none or very few restrictions vs. stringent controls) (Van Prooijen, Krouwel, and Emmer 2018). Tension between the extreme left and extreme right over migration might make the topic more visible in party discourse and result in posts being labelled as negative in sentiment, because they are dealing with the beliefs and proposals of opponents rather than with migration *per se*.

It is also possible that the migration discourse of extreme left parties follows a similar pattern to that of extreme right parties, because they are targeting similar voter groups. Whilst highly educated, left leaning people tend to vote for slightly left of centre parties, the more extreme left-wing parties appeal to working-class voters who, like voters for far-right parties, fear economic globalisation and the consequences of increased immigration. It is possible that when right-wing parties make anti-immigration discourse a prominent part of their communication, some left-leaning parties adopt a similarly negative stance towards migration in order to be able to compete for the same group of voters. Thus the stances of parties of the extreme left and right might converge (Alonso and Fonseca 2012). Although based on different reasoning, far left and far right parties frequently find common ground on protectionism and EU scepticism (Halikiopoulou, Nanou, and Vasilopoulou 2012). This is furthermore supported by literature on populist

communication, a communication style often shared by parties of the ideological extreme (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017). Populists prefer SNS to other forms of political communication (Ernst et al. 2019) and amongst the characteristics of populist communication are that it is designed to provoke conflict, anti-elitist (e.g. Müller et al. 2017) and emotive (Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese 2017) reactions. The ambiguity over the actual intent of a status post should be one of the main starting points for future investigations.

This study set out to complement research on one of the most relevant topics in European countries; namely public discourse about migration. Applying a comparative approach enabled us to compare the discourse on migration in various countries and to shed light on the relationship between left-right ideology and migration discourse. This study also presents more nuanced picture of the differences and similarities in discourse and improves our understanding of a neglected, but potentially important topic, namely the migration-related communication strategies of political actors on social media.

Although we checked the robustness of the above mentioned results, our study still has its limitations. Our sample provided a good cross-section of European countries, but non-receiving countries were under-represented (two non-receiving vs. four receiving countries). This was partly due to concerns about the performance of the Google Translate API and to difficulties identifying political actors (especially in Eastern Europe). Moreover, by limiting our analysis to the posts of MPs we excluded parties that might, although not represented in their country's national parliament, play a role in political discourses on Facebook. However, sampling decisions had to be made for the sake of comparability between countries and years of analysis. We are nevertheless confident that we obtained sufficient comparable data, with enough variation in the receiving category status of countries and ideological orientation of parties, to draw meaningful conclusions about the migration discourse of European political actors on Facebook.

Other limitations relate to the dictionary-based sentiment analysis. In future, it may be possible to use more resource-intensive approaches, but we relied on a free, pre-validated tool that requires texts to be translated before analysis. Although the output of translation services is largely unproblematic (e.g. De Vries, Schoonvelde, and Schumacher 2018), it is still prone to error. In using only one tool, instead of language-specific ones, we aimed to keep measurement errors to a minimum, as sentiment tools are not infallible (e.g. Puschmann and Powell 2018). We also want to note that we cannot make any direct assertion about the effects of the sentiment of analysed posts on readers' attitude to migration. That should be the starting point for further research.

Finally, although Facebook has shut down parts of its API, we would encourage scholars to pursue research on SNS content, given that digital native, in particular, come into contact with political parties' communications primarily through social media (Ohme 2019). Researchers need to make more effort to understand the migration discourse to which citizens are exposed and should also investigate non-textual content (e.g. pictures or videos) for as long as this remains technically feasible.

## Notes

1. The Python script opened each Facebook page automatically in a browser window. One of the authors then had to decide whether the Facebook page belongs to the respective politician and is not a fake.



2. Please note that the subject of this study was party communication; it does not cover user comments or answers to politicians' status posts.
3. 'Forum' in Spain; 'Democratic Unionist Party' in the UK; 'Peter Pilz List' in Austria; Independent MPs Andrzej Celiński and Longin Komolowski as well as Ryszard Galla (Germany Minority) in Poland. For an overview of included parties with detailed information on left-right score and volume of posts, please see Table A1 in the Online Appendix.
4. Search strings were not simply translated into every language, some contained country- and language-specific terms. For a full list of search strings see Table A2 in the Online Appendix.
5. Although we decided to rely on human coders for search string development, we want to note that this is not always the most efficient approach. Human search string construction may be prone to errors such as the inclusion of irrelevant terms or the exclusion of terms important to the researched concept (King, Lam, and Roberts 2017). Alternative approaches such as topic modelling, do not involve human interference and only include terms that emerge directly from text corpora (Heidenreich, Lind, Eberl, and Boomgaarden 2019).
6. Neither lemmatising nor stemming were deemed necessary.
7. Note that Recall and Precision both range from 0 to 1. If Recall is 1, the procedure results in no false-negative identifications. If Precision is at 1, the procedure results in no false positive identifications. Both measures have to be high to achieve satisfactory levels of validity.
8. The parties that were excluded due to a low number of cases were the 'Basque Nationalist Party' ( $n = 5$ ), 'Canarian Coalition' ( $n = 14$ ), 'Catalan Republican Left' ( $n = 4$ ), 'Democratic Convergence of Catalonia' ( $n = 1$ ) and 'Spanish Socialist Workers' Party' in Spain ( $n = 36$ ); 'Sinn Féin' ( $n = 11$ ) and 'Plaid Cymru' ( $n = 12$ ) in the UK; and 'Liberal People's Party' ( $n = 30$ ) in Sweden.
9. See <https://cloud.google.com/translate/docs/> for details.
10. While effects are not as pronounced, substantial results of ANCOVA and OLS below remain the same when using then sentiment dictionary SentiStrength (Thelwall et al. 2010) instead. Unlike Lexicoder, SentiStrength was not validated on political texts but on MySpace comments.
11. Note that because we do not have information about the sentiment of non-migration-related texts, we are not able to make absolute statements about the sentiment of migration-related posts. We can, however, compare the sentiment in one country or party with that in another. Further limitations of our approach are discussed in the final section of this paper.

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