

Migration Narratives in Europe

A Social Media Intelligence Study

Country report for the Kingdom of Spain



A Bakamo Public  **Project for the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung**

- 2019 -



Context to the Spanish Discussion on Migration

- Spain has been a member of the European Union (former European Communities) since 1986, with a population of 46,449,565 in 2015. At its peak, official **asylum seekers in the country made up 0.01% of the population**.*
- Public social media conversation in Spain around migration in one year consists of ~4,428,000 posts. Compared to population size, **the conversation on migration in Spain is the 9th largest in the EU**.
- The Spanish government famously decided to **accept the refugee ship Aquarius**, which catapulted the migration discourse from the sidelines to the main subject.
- The discourse was **overwhelmingly humanitarian, however we can see different opinions arise amidst the turbulent Spanish political landscape**.



*Source: europarl.europa.eu

Introduction | ES

A Test of Tolerance

Spain made headlines last year after accepting the refugee ship Aquarius, and was previously polled as the most accepting of asylum seekers in all of Europe.

However, the conversation on public social media shows a slightly different picture: **migration was not a significant part of the Spanish discourse up until the crisis of Aquarius**. While celebrated for their humane handling of the situation – which is echoed by the overwhelming humanitarianism of the discussion – **less tolerant opinions seem to be rising and are being capitalized by politics**.

With a backdrop of a history of immigration in the 2000s which sharpened into hard border controls by 2007, we can see how **different narratives shift to support different type of policies by echoing different parts of the past**.



All images represented in this report appeared as attachments to posts on public social media platforms, and are used here as illustrations of the public online conversation.



Key Findings | ES

How and where do Spanish discuss migration in the social media space?

Size of Pan-European Narratives

Humanitarianism was the dominant discourse at 94%, encompassing many different ways of looking at the refugee crisis triggered by Aquarius - and foreshadowing a change of attitude towards migration in general.

Local Issues

The local discourse is the **crisis itself**, showing how a bold humanitarian move could create a sixfold increase in the conversation around migration, which then moves on to the political arena.

EU & Domestic Politics

While European politics were mostly mentioned prior to the Aquarius docking, we can see a shift in how the migration subject becomes an immediate issue of domestic politics afterward.

Discussion Tone

The discussion tone was mostly conversational, however within economy and identity we see a greater degree of polarization that reflects the sensitive nature of these narratives within the broader Spanish context.

Conversation Channels

The majority of the discourse was conducted through **tweets** at 84%, with blogs and the news behind it.



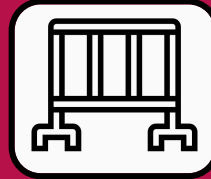
Pan-European Narratives in the Spanish Context



Humanitarianism was the dominant narrative, as Spain has a **long history of immigration and a recent memory of a refugee crisis**. The country also has an experience with authoritarianism, that adds an edge within the humanitarian discourse.



The demographic narrative was tied into a bigger discourse around **feminism** in Spain - where immigration was tied into a package of anti-feminist politics based on certain events that could be tied to women of immigrant backgrounds.



Security, while relatively minor, was placed in the context of the **fenced spanish enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta** - both fenced off from Morocco.



The economic narrative was discussed in the political context of the costs associated with the **generous humanitarianism, perceived as unfair within the wider economic problems of Spain**, while others warned against the economic exploitation of migration.



Identity in Spain is contrasted with the **fluidity of identity**, in a country that has experience with immigration - as opposed to the perceived incompatible values of the “un-European” immigrants.

+ *Pan-European Narratives in Spain*



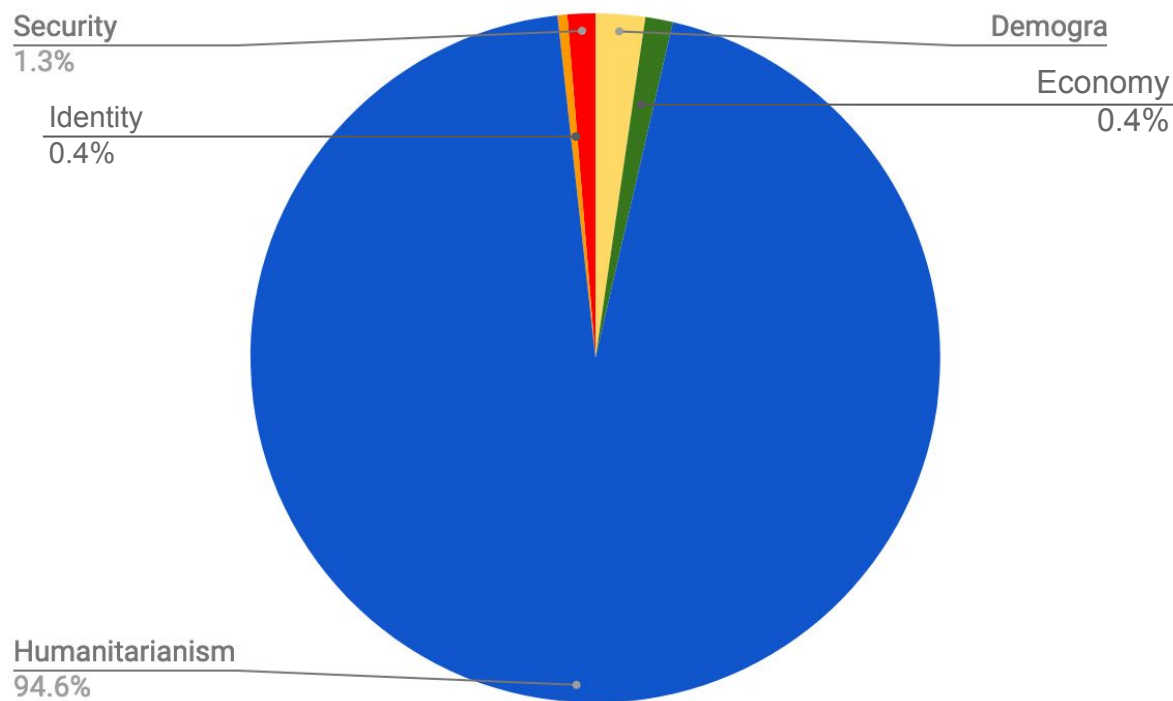
1.



The shape of the migration discourse

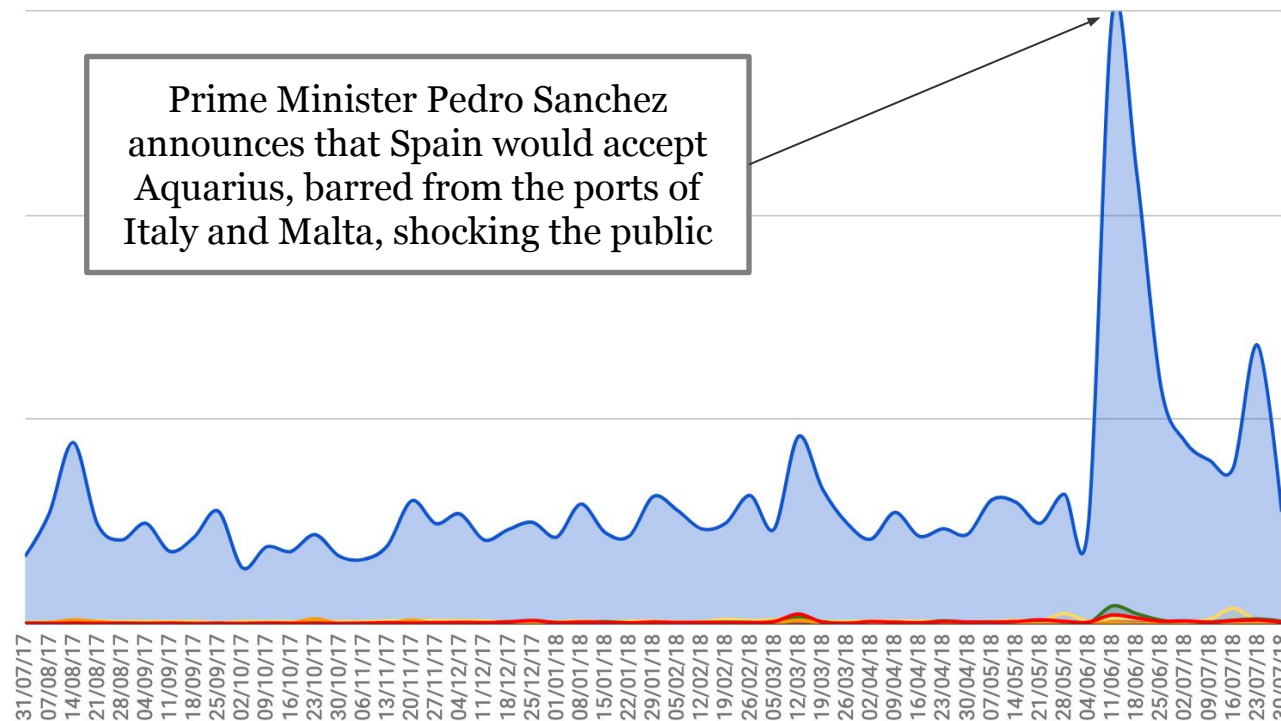
The Spanish discourse on migration was not significant until the acceptance of **Aquarius**, which sparked most of the total discussion and put further emphasis on migration related issues. The dominant narrative was humanitarian, as was the gesture of accepting the refugees in the first place. However, certain emerging trends in the discourse around different specific subjects foreshadow a turn in the welcoming policies.

Results:
~4,4m



Demographics Economy Humanitarianism Identity Security

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez announces that Spain would accept Aquarius, barred from the ports of Italy and Malta, shocking the public

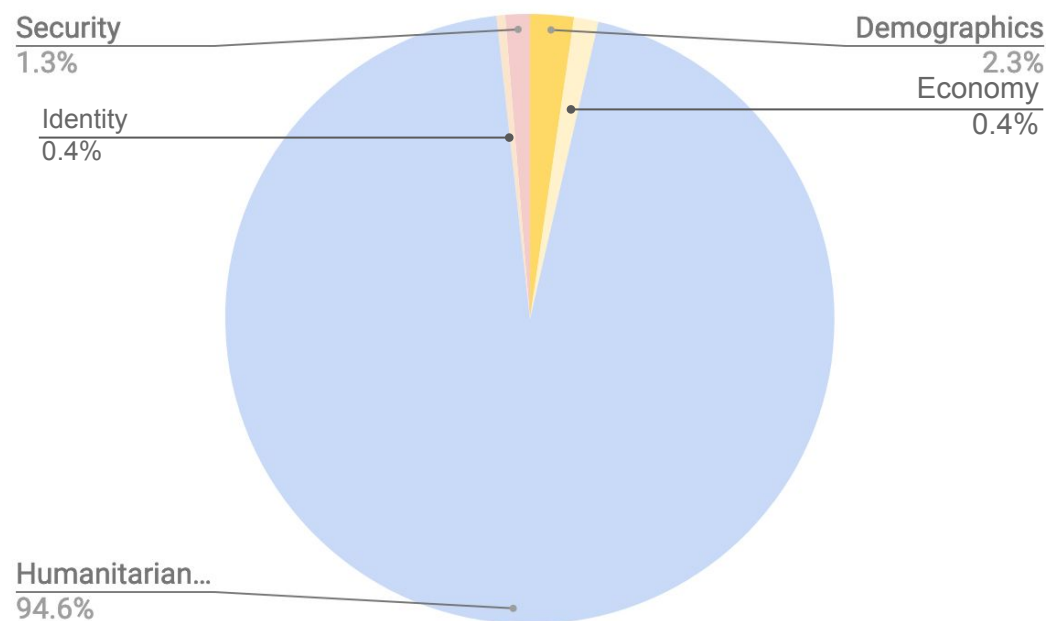


Pan-European Narratives | ES

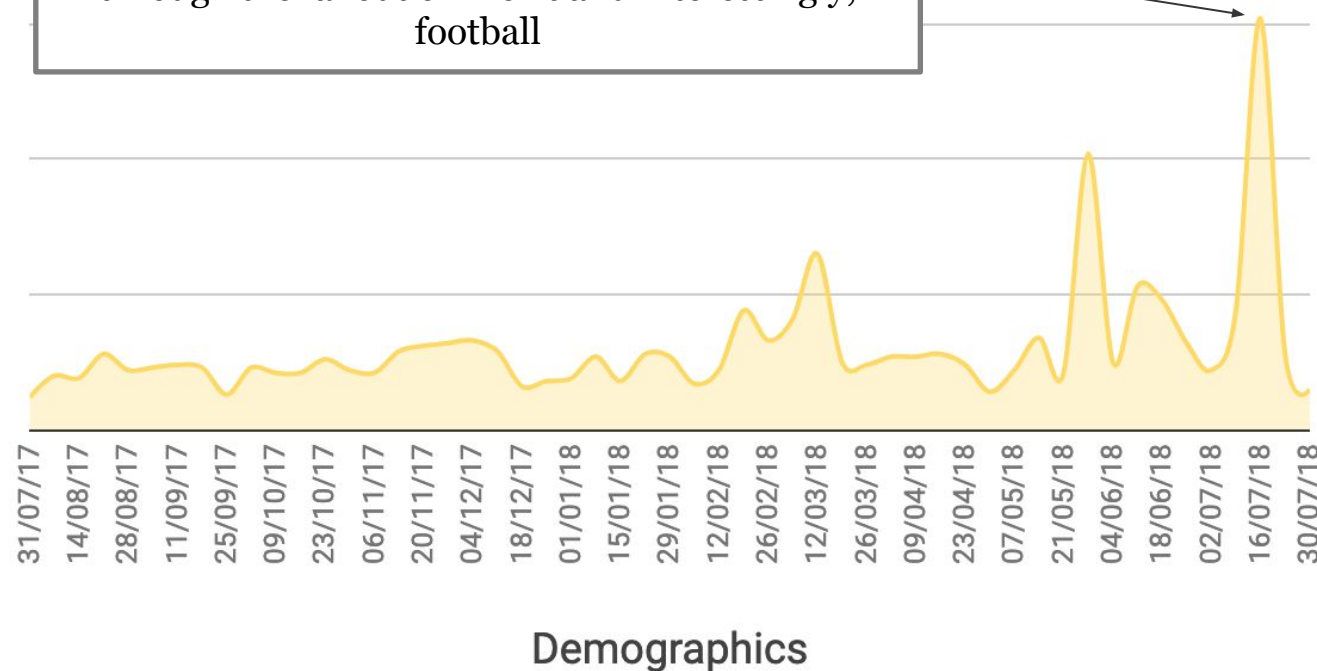
Demographics (1)

Demography, the second largest narrative shows how the triggering event of the Aquarius situation amplifies related conversations on migration. In Spain, **questions on whether or not the demographic problems of Europe and the world can be sustained by migration spiked some time after the humanitarian gesture** - and in general were mostly discussed through images of football players - which is a sizeable part of the economy in Spain and part of their national “brand”.

Results:
~101k



Following Aquarius, interest rises in the demographic implications of migration - discussed through the fallout of Brexit and interestingly, football



Pan-European Narratives | ES

Demographics (2)

ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

Migration is viewed as a subset of other complex economic and demographic problems

“1) The EU does not adopt a common stance towards illegal immigration 2) We receive immigrants en masse 3) These immigrants collapse the working class neighborhoods 4) The workers start voting for eurosceptic parties 5) The EU laments the rise of Eurosceptic parties...”

“The big problem to solve is: unemployment, garbage wages, cuts in social rights, refugees who are ignored and / or persecuted”

“Permanent mass immigration is not sustainable. There may be occasional events that generate it, but when it becomes permanent it is an anomaly. What we are living is not immigration , it is a human trafficking business”



Football was present in the demographic discourse, both due to the World Cup and with a high profile scandal involving Cristiano Ronaldo - while the previous featured many players with immigrant backgrounds and some calling the sport the best showcase of successful immigration, the star player *emigrated* out of the country while under scrutiny of tax dodging - which lead to callouts of *racism* and *hypocrisy* of some football fans.

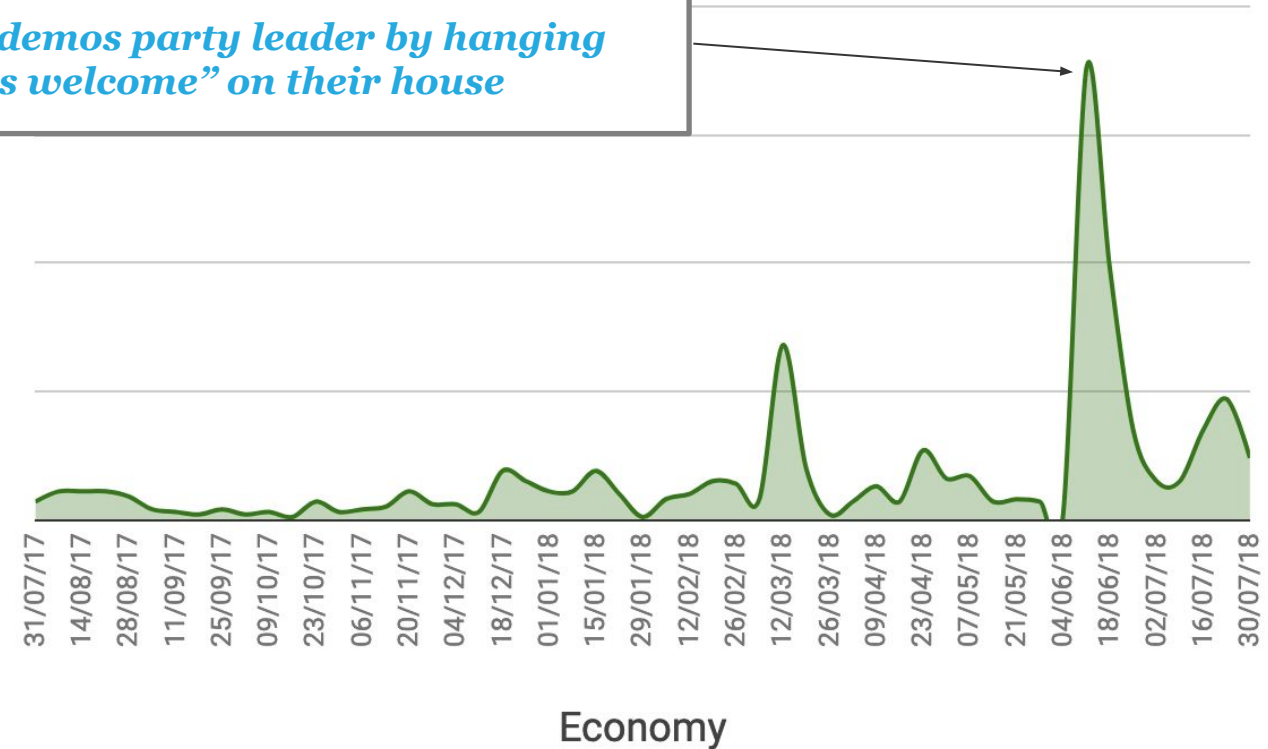
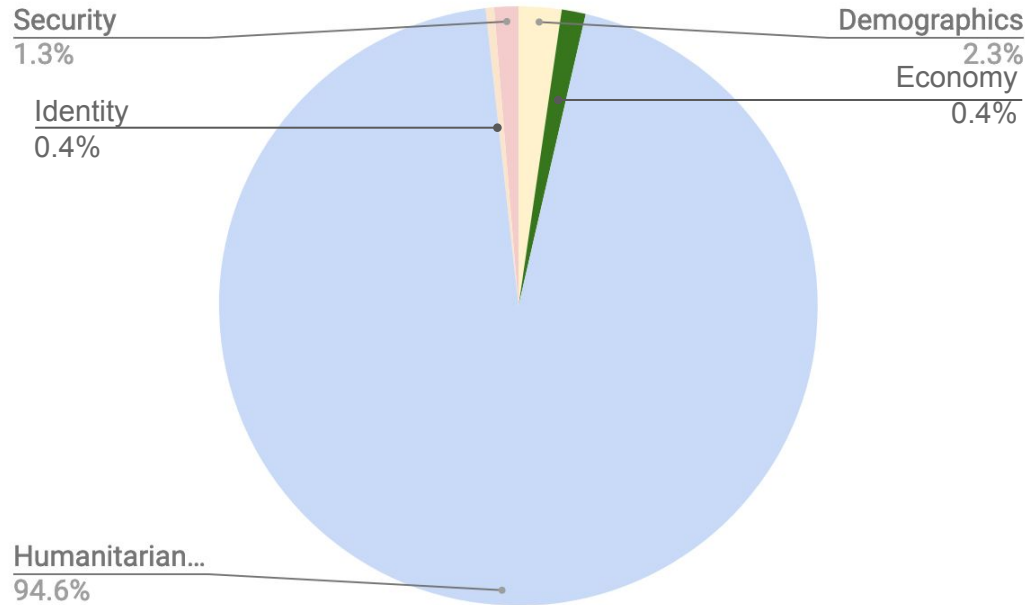
Pan-European Narratives | ES

Economy (1)

The economic narrative was less concerned with the raw mathematics of the benefits of migration, and more concerned with **politics**: more precisely with **politicians who are perceived to be generous towards refugees even at the cost of their own local populace**. While the Aquarius issue was the biggest spike, we can see a smaller run-up event related to the subject that serves as a frame for this discourse after the Vox party used immigration to attack their political opponents in Spain.

Results:
~57k

*Youth wing of Vox mocks Podemos party leader by hanging
“Squatters and refugees welcome” on their house*



ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

Economic narrative shows an outrage towards left wing politicians

“THE RETIRED PEOPLE GET LESS THAN THE PRISONERS AND NOW LESS THAN THE IMMIGRANTS THAT DO NOT CONTRIBUTE A HAND, 14000 FOR 3 MONTHS AND FREE COURSES? SLEEVE HDP. I DID NOT VOTE THAT”

“Refugees who do not fit into Ana Pastor's house can go to Pablo Iglesias' house.”

“Neither immigrants , nor Catalonia, nor taxi drivers for Pedro Sánchez: the socialist president is going three weeks on vacation to the beach”



The far-right Vox party capitalized on the scandal involving the Podemos leadership's expensive villa by connecting the perceived hypocrisy with the migration crisis.

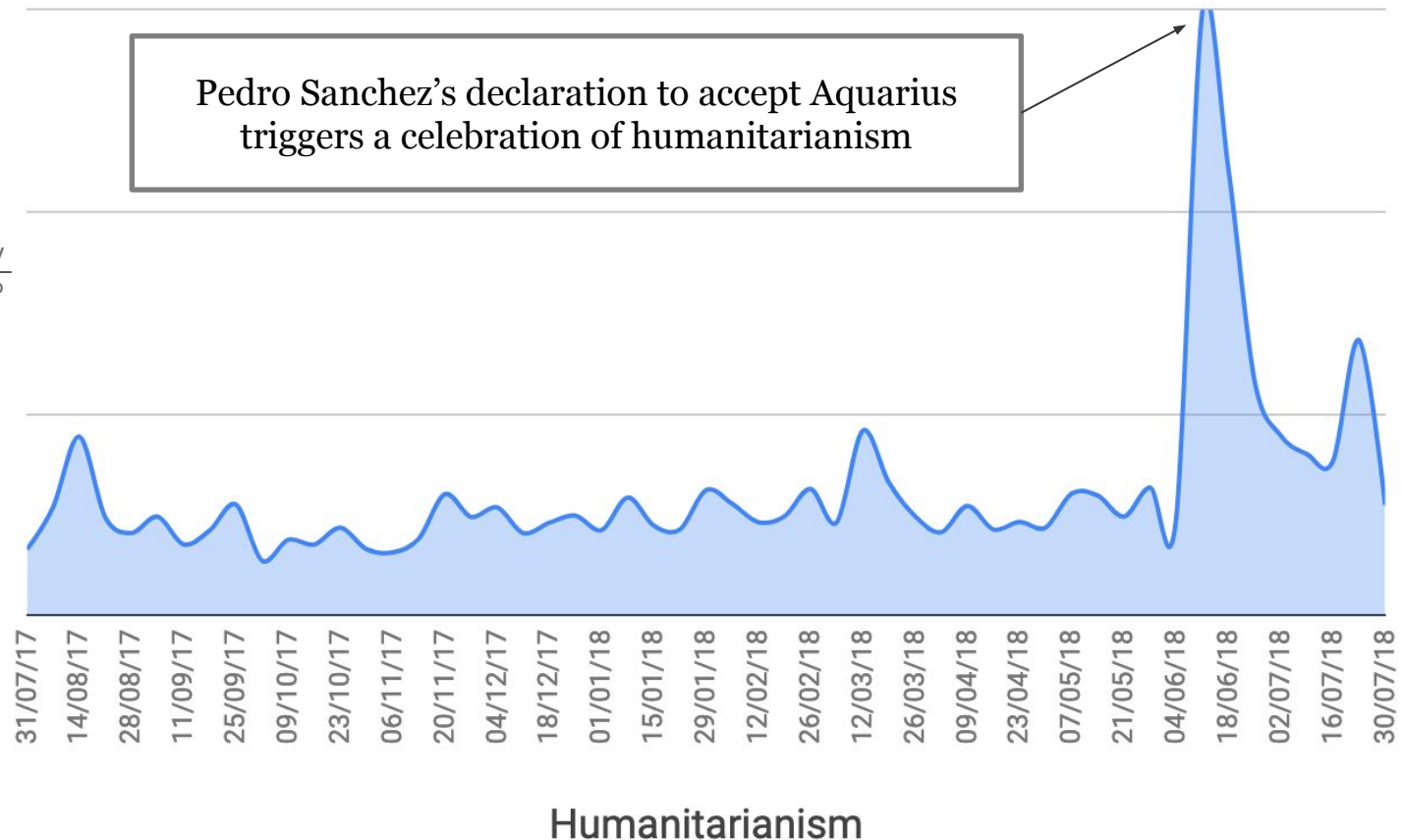
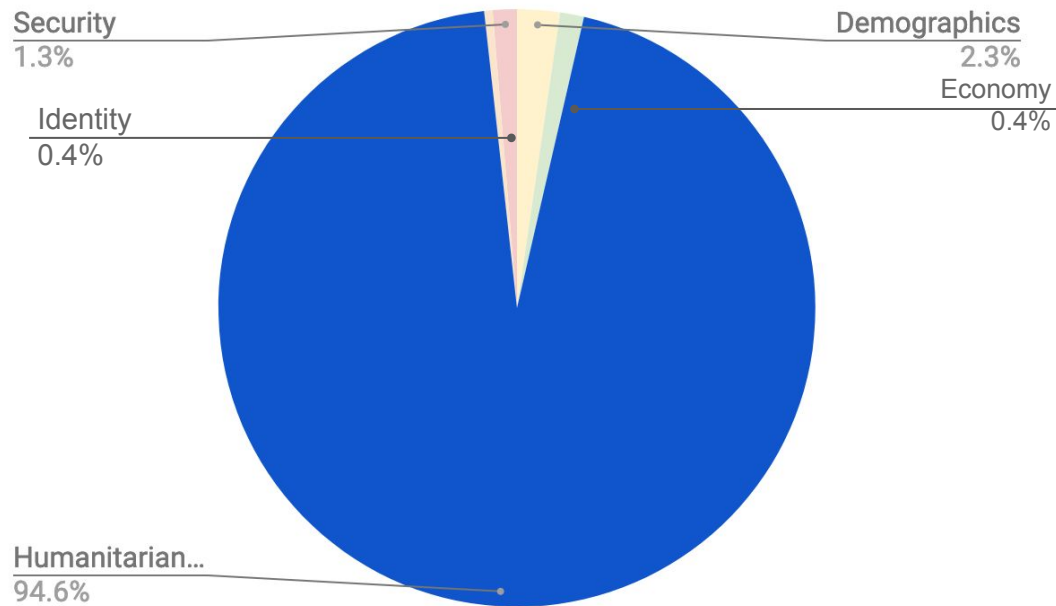


Pan-European Narratives | ES

Humanitarianism (1)

Humanitarianism was the dominant discourse in Spain overall, even prior to Aquarius, reflecting a strong humanitarian and empathetic current present in Spanish society. The welcoming of the refugees was equally celebrated on humanitarian grounds, echoing these sentiments after attention to migration greatly increased.

Results:
~4.1m



Pan-European Narratives | ES

Humanitarianism (2)

PRO-MIGRANT VOICES

Humanitarianism evokes a sense of pride in spite of an indifferent EU

“A thousand apologies to immigrants who suffer mistreatment and abuse by some compatriots, I assure you that we are more that we welcome and understand that come to get their families ahead”

“European Solidarity? They let the Jews die, they let the refugees die, they let the Catalans beat, not a reproach to Erdogan who massacres the Kurds who have fought against the Islamic State. Add and follow. How not to question this EU?”

“Belgium massively cuts trees so that they do not serve as a hiding place for immigrants. This news is disgusting in so many different ways that my head is going to explode.”



“Two immigrants immobilize a volunteer who helped them. The victim, who is out of danger of racist prejudice, recovers satisfactorily from a fit of laughter and compassion.”



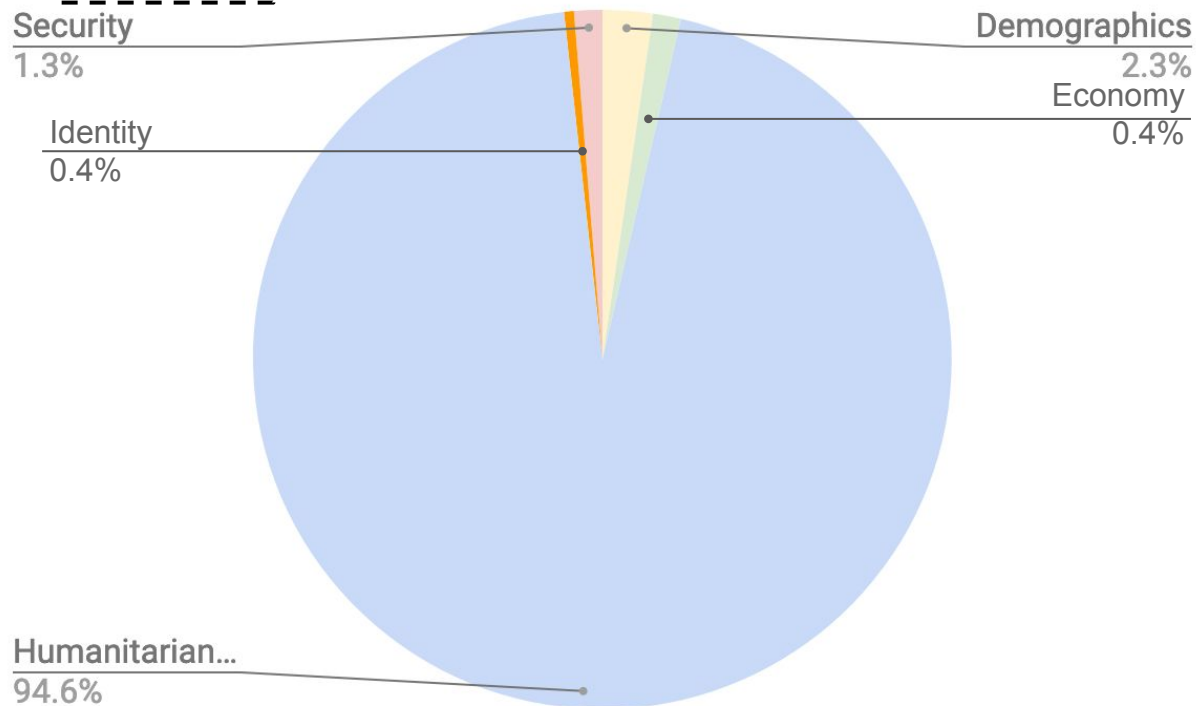
Images present in the humanitarianist narrative emphasize not just empathy with the plight of migrants and refugees, but the **joys of active solidarity** as well.

Pan-European Narratives | ES

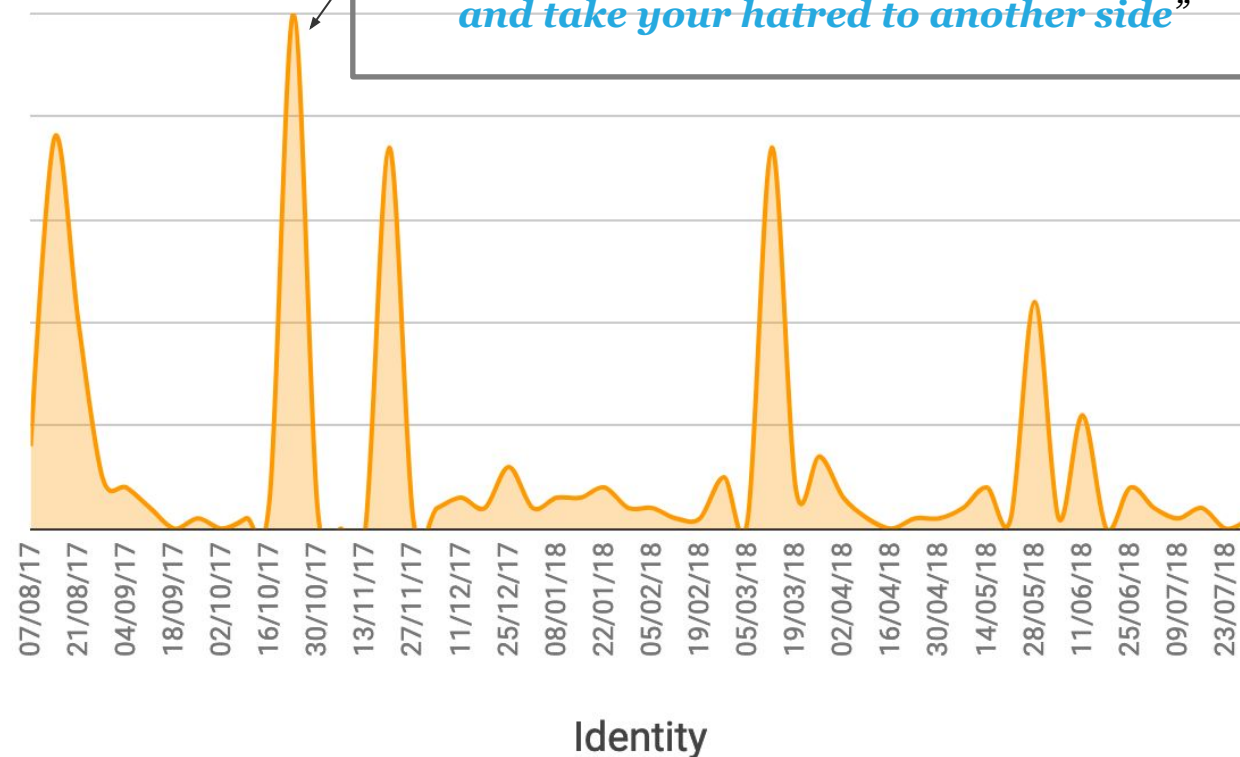
Identity and Customs (1)

The identity discourse was moving completely differently than the rest of the conversation. The comments represented a harsh anti-migrant attitude, unrelated to the actual crisis of Aquarius and more related to international politics and the local security discourse, revealing a divide within Spanish society, which could be summed up by the problem of **“intolerance of intolerance”**.

Results:
~22k



*“I am Catalan, gay and my partner is a Colombian immigrant. **Try to defame with something else and take your hatred to another side**”*



Pan-European Narratives | ES

Identity and Customs (2)

ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

Approval of those who would protect European identity, and disapproval of those who are perceived to threaten it via migration

*“**Hungary** fixes illegal immigration as a threat to national security and passes prison sentences for facilitating the entry of undocumented immigrants . The so-called "Stop Soros" law has been approved with 160 votes in favor and 18 against!”*

*“**They want us to live in a world where freedom of expression is not guaranteed for those of us who question gender ideology, irresponsible immigration policies and the Islamization of Europe.**”*

*“This interview is more than four years old but it is quite current. **We are still waiting for Ana Pastor to tell us how many immigrants she has already received at Villa Ferreras**”*



*“The dignity of a person does not depend on whether he is a citizen, migrant or refugee . Saving the life of someone who escapes war and misery is an act of humanity.
[#WithRefugees](#)”*

In contrast with the political comments, the Pope's Spanish tweet embracing humanitarianism was welcomed in the Spanish identity discourse.



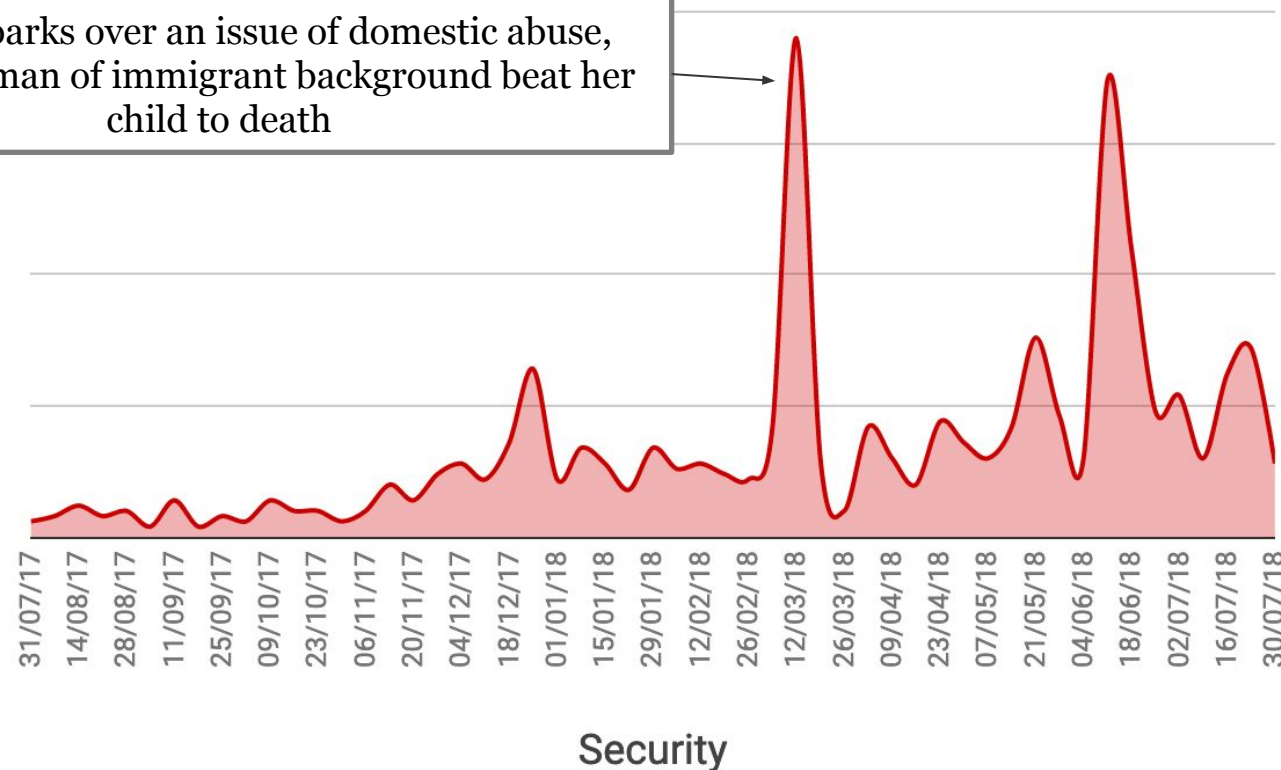
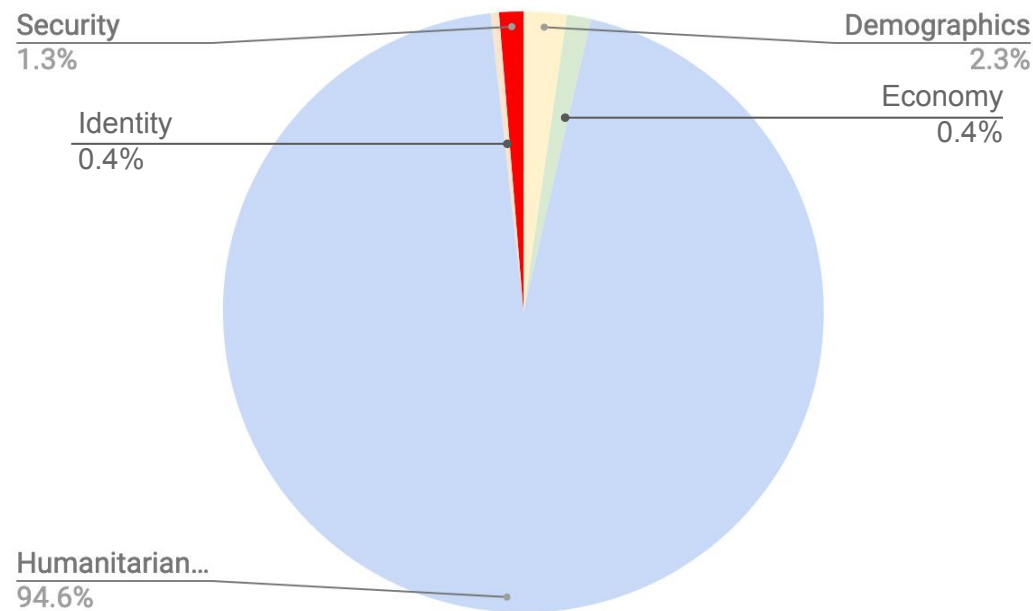
Pan-European Narratives | ES

Security (1)

The security narrative shows that there is more behind the Spanish discourse than just humanitarianism: we see that here the biggest peak is around a **domestic criminal issue committed by someone with an immigrant background, that precedes the welcoming of Aquarius, and starts picking up as a small wave of securitization within the migration discourse**. The comments here reflect a politicized conversation that looks towards other countries' examples when it comes to the policing of migrants.

Results:
~57k

Outrage sparks over an issue of domestic abuse, where a woman of immigrant background beat her child to death



ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

Migration and crime are related to those politicians who let them in

*“42 Colombian immigrants expelled from Peru for exercising criminal activities. **Peru lecturing!**”*

*“**When those who rape girls are refugees or Muslims, the podemites and their means of misinformation are silent or justified.** They do not seek justice, they seek revenge against those they consider enemies.”*

*“This is how violent the cries of Senegalese immigrants in Lavapiés are. - Shouting “Municipal Assassins.” - **Then the miserable ones of Podemos can defend them**”*

The fallout of migration invokes fears of rising fascism

*“I am going to tell you **what will happen with the #Aquarius immigrants : - Radicalized ones in a mosque - Others of manteros - Others thrown in the street forced to steal - And most picking fruit for four duros. Is that your solidarity?**”*

*“**Imagine those fascists patrolling at night with gun plaque and gag law, crossing with immigrants , gypsies, reds, Jews, women, beggars**”*

*“Good decision. **No fascist should be able to be a policeman. We can not give guns to those who want to end the lives of immigrants** , communists and public representatives.”*

+ *Local Narratives in Spain Around Migration*



2.

The Crisis Changes the Conversation

The following examples show how different topics were picked up in relation to the crisis of Aquarius, such as the case of the “pateras” - small boats that carry migrants shore to shore, the border fence in the enclave of Ceuta, the far-right political party Vox and how the security narrative laid on the support of forum based media.

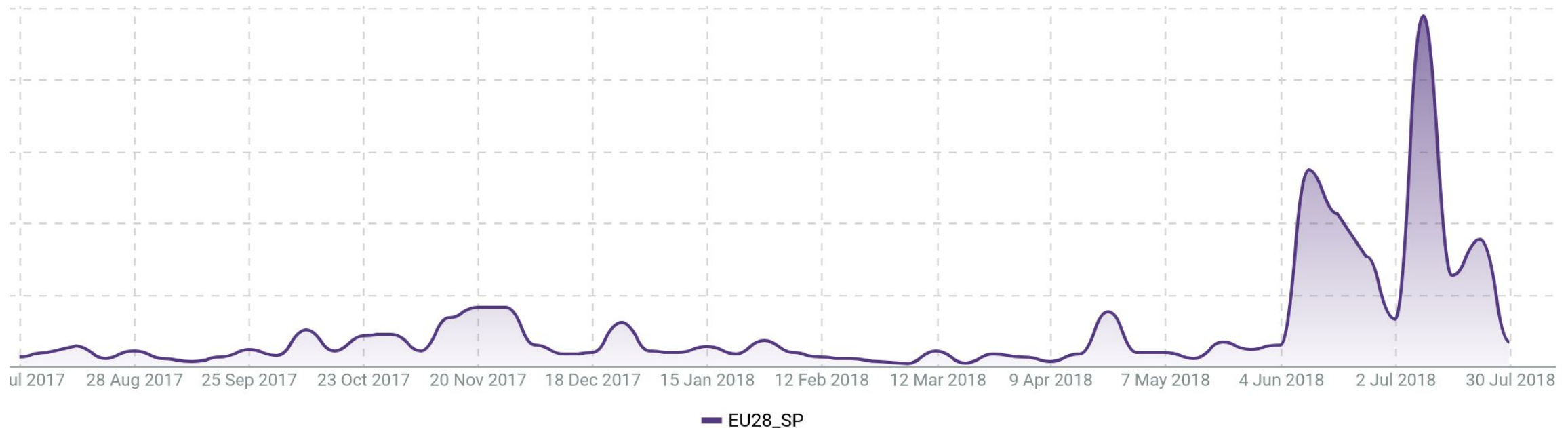
Example 1: Mentions of **Aquarius**: no public exposure prior to the crisis and attention soon fades away



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Example 2: Mentions of “**pateras**”, small boats that are used by migrants to reach Spanish shores jumps to the top of the attention immediately after Aquarius despite being an ongoing issue even beforehand



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Example 3: Mentions of “**Vox**”, raised attention by **galvanizing anti-immigrant outrage after the welcoming of Aquarius**, showing how they gain momentum, and putting migration in a political context prior to the crisis with a “troll” action at a Podemos politicians house.



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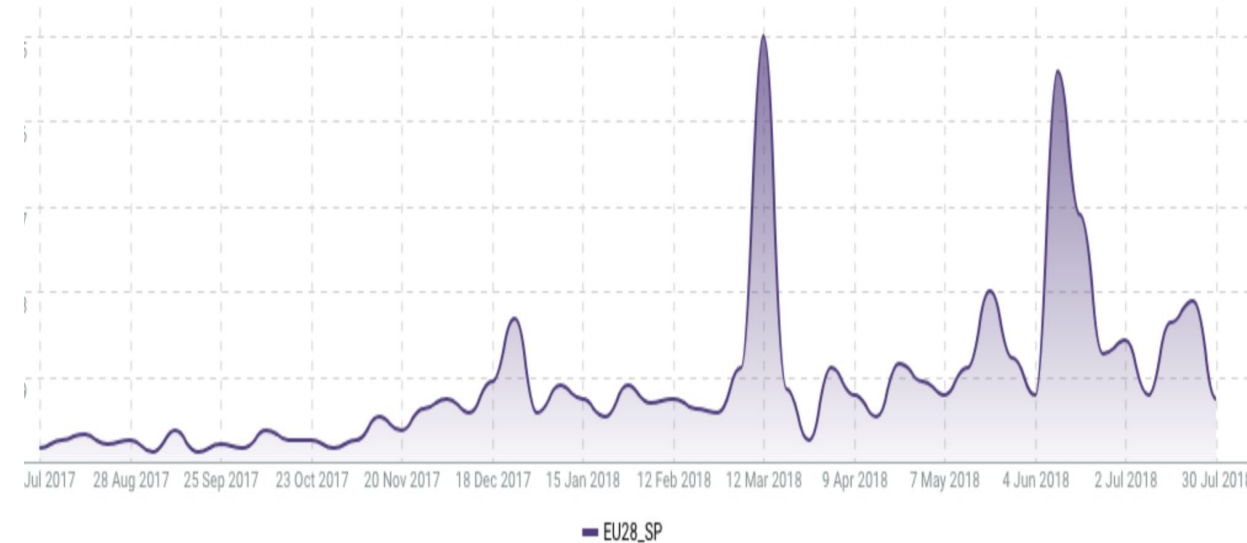
Example 4: Mentions of “**Ceuta**”, where a border fence hinders crossing, gets to the center of attention after Aquarius



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Example 5: Forum post activities compared to the security narrative. Note the correlation in heightened activity even prior to Aquarius in regards to migration, showing an anti-migrant sentiment brewing even prior to the crisis.



+ *Migration in the Context of European- and Domestic Politics*



3.

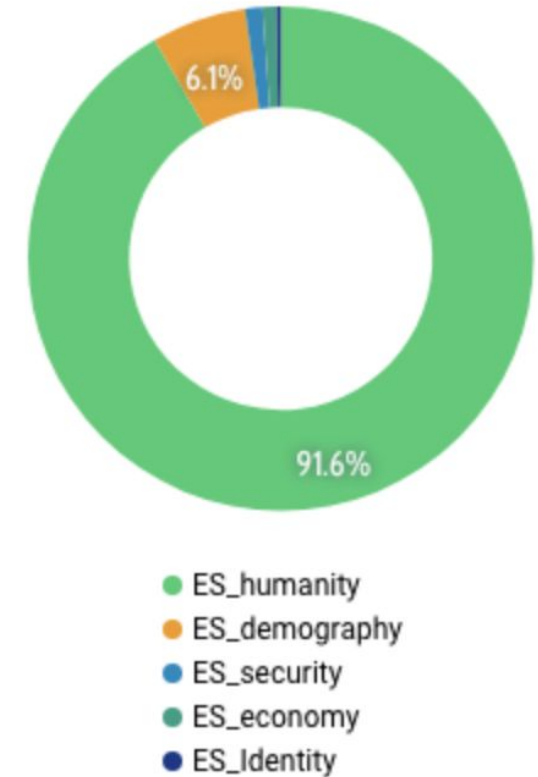
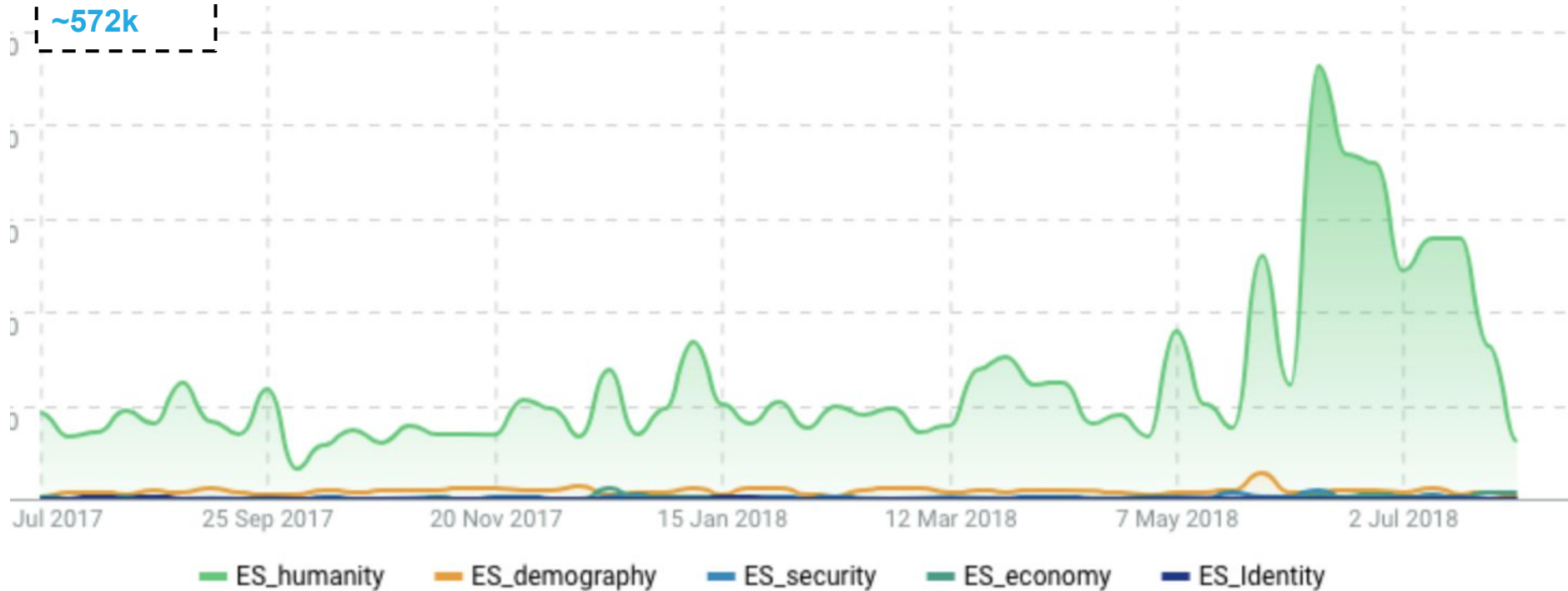


European and Domestic Politics Context within Narratives | ES

European References: A Question of Examples

European references (13%) were more numerous than domestic ones overall as the migration crisis only entered the Spanish social media discourse after the Aquarius scandal, and thus the subject could only be discussed in light of EU politics, which were contrasted with Spanish humanitarianism, knowing that most of the continent will not adopt a similar strategy.

Results:
~572k



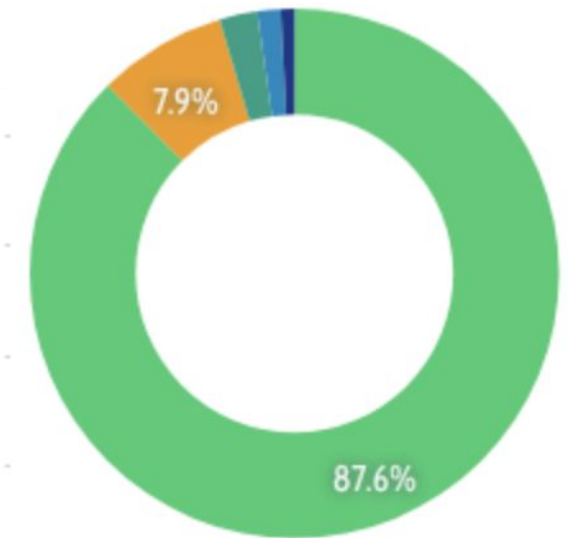
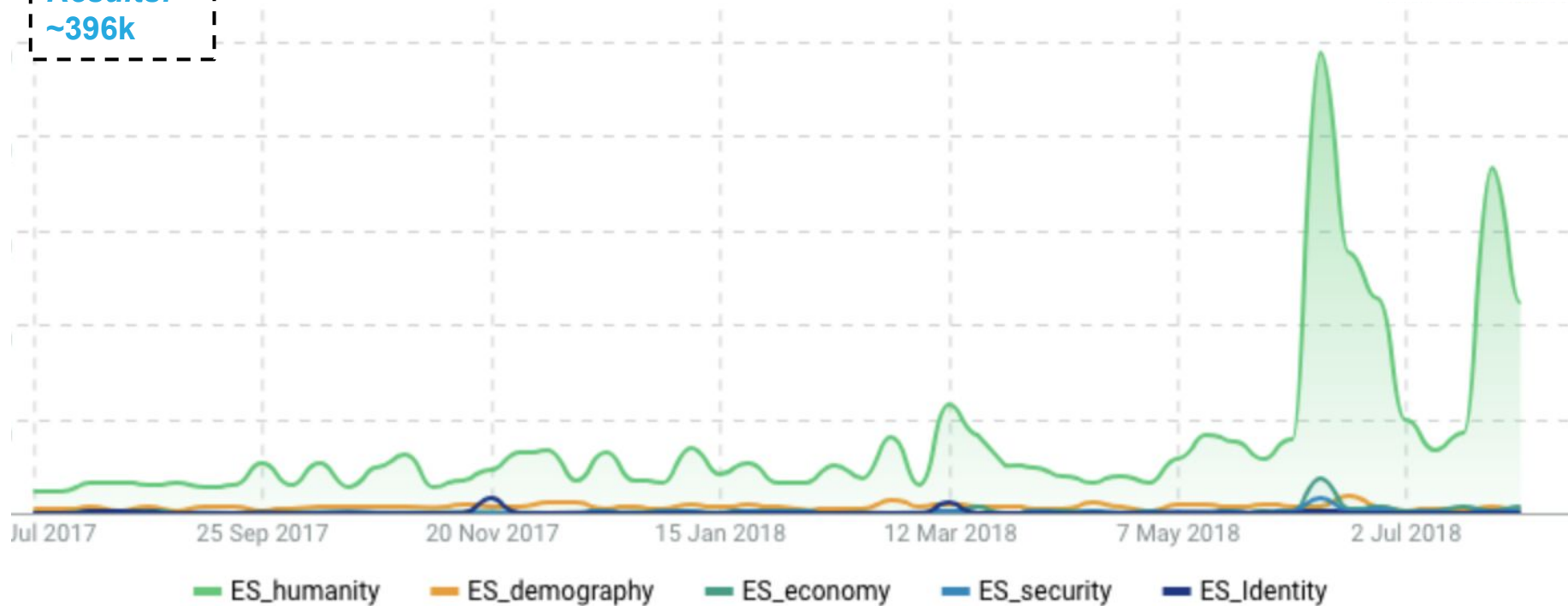


European and Domestic Politics Context within Narratives | ES

Domestic politics: discussed through security

Domestic references, invoked in 9% of the results, were tied to the overall conversation as welcoming Aquarius was first declared by the prime minister, and later the question of the fence at Ceuta was also discussed under the umbrella of local politics. The cost of helping asylum seekers amid other domestic economic issues placed the subject firmly in the political arena as well.

Results:
~396k



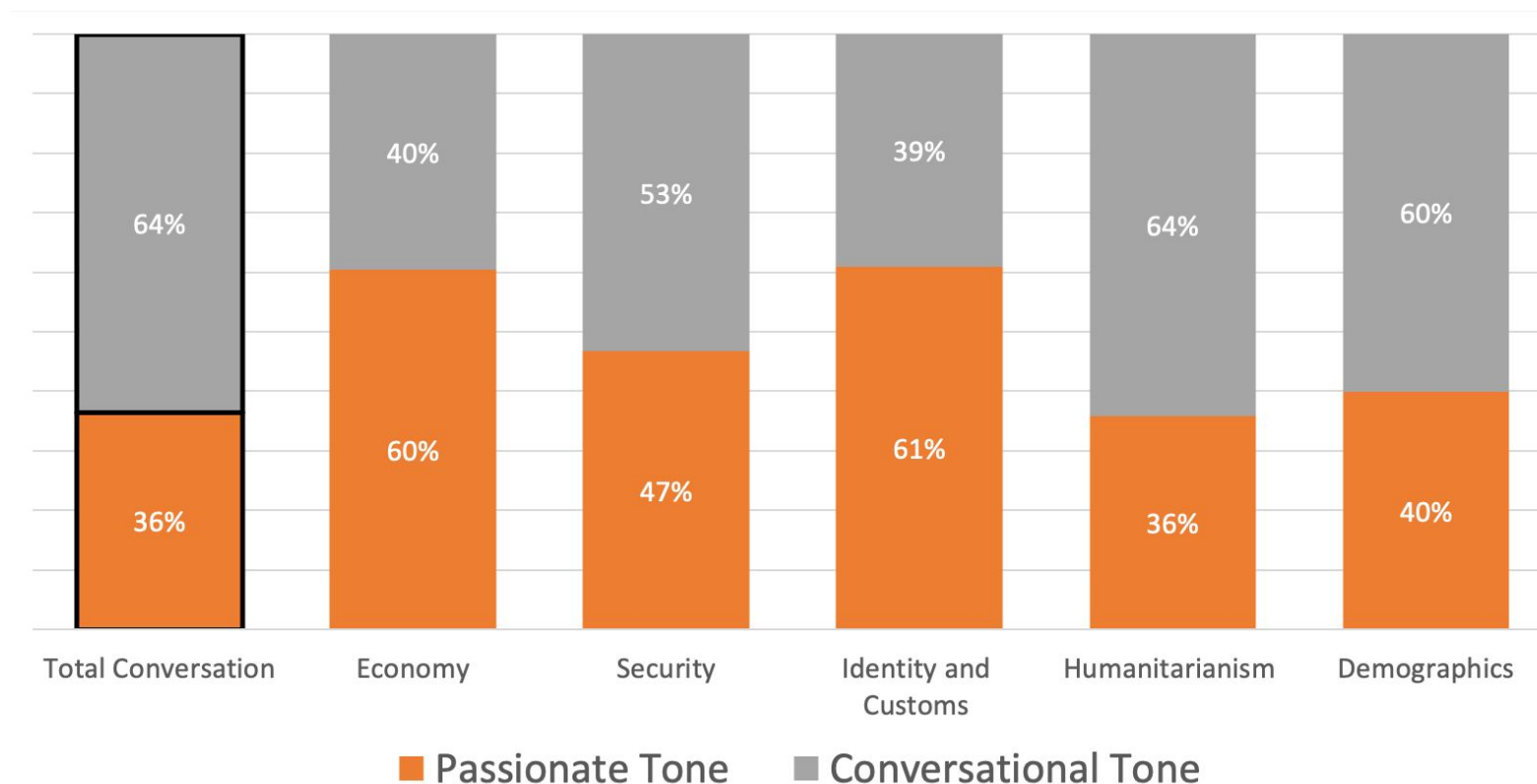
+ *Discussion Tone in Spain*



4.

Passions brewing in political arguments

While the overall conversation was not in a passionate tone, we can see that in certain narratives (economy and identity) there is a high level of polarization, indicating much more divisive subjects present in Spanish society regarding politics that were expressed in the migration conversation as well.



+ *Conversation Channels*



5.

Channel Distribution | ES

Live Tweeting History

The discourse was **87% tweets**, driven by discussing the news - but interestingly under it we find a layer of forums and blogs that served to pin up certain narratives, such as that of security.

Most influential author



por diario show
Online News

Most active site



burbuja.info
Forums

