

Migration Narratives in Europe

A Social Media Intelligence Study

Country report for the Republic of Estonia



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

- 2019 -



Context to the Estonian Discussion on Migration

- Estonia has been a member of the European Union since 2004, with a population of 1,313,271 in 2015. At its peak, official **asylum seekers in the country made up 0.03% of the population**, which means that the country does not have a pressing migration problem, however by public mood they are the least accepting of migrants according to the Gallup migrant acceptance index.
- Public social media conversation in Estonia around migration in one year consists of ~11,128 posts. Compared to population size, **the conversation on migration in Estonia is the smallest in the EU**.
- The Estonian immigration policy was famous for its openness in preceding years, however the **migration discourse** became a decisive factor in the landscape of shifting policies and politics.
- Although government policies were initially welcoming and humanitarian, the data reflects a political challenger successfully monopolizing the discourse by framing migration as a threat to national security and identity.
- Although there is a strong Russian-speaking community in the country, this report analyses comments posted in **Estonian**.



*Source: europarl.europa.eu

Introduction | EE

A Brewing Government Crisis On the Border of Europe

Estonia has long been famous for its welcoming policy towards business and economic migrants to balance the country's economy under EU integration, but **the strong perceived threat of Russian geopolitical ambitions** have long bolstered a strong nationalist undercurrent.

While the country does not have a pressing migration problem, the data shows how the entire subject of migration was successfully capitalized on the grounds of **security**, making room for a highly polarized discourse that is **strongly anti-migrant** and is tied to domestic or EU politics at its core.



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.



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

Size of Pan-European Narratives

Migration is mostly discussed in terms of **security** and as a potential threat to Estonia, while humanitarianism comes as a minor second, echoing empathetic sentiments, mostly for migrants abroad.

Local Issues

Russia was invoked in 18% of the migration discourse, not only due to the **perceived threat** by Estonia's biggest neighbour but also because of the **present ethnic minority** in the country who are represented as migrants in this discourse.

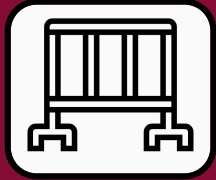
EU & Domestic Politics

EU politics were mentioned over **50%** of the conversation, indicating that the subject is mostly a tool in international politics. Domestic policies, while lower in raw mentions, showed that **migration serves as a political division within Estonia** as well.

Conversation Channels

The majority of the discourse was conducted through **online news portals**. Posts published in the blogosphere and Twitter reacting to them in an opinionated manner.

Pan-European Narratives in the Estonian Context



The migration discourse is highly **securitized**, mainly through highlighting crimes committed by migrants abroad on a constant basis.



Humanitarianism was discussed mostly through the **dire situation of migrants abroad** - either on the shores of Europe or through the policies of the US.



Demographics were discussed through the fact that some Estonians criticized the government over the proposed migration policies which were perceived as insufficient to counterbalance the alarming Estonian emigration rate.



The economic aspects were mostly discussed in terms of **unfairness** towards the local populace as opposed to the aid received by migrants from outside of the EU.



The identity question was mostly tied to the **identity of Europe**, but not through the question of Islam or Christianity, rather that of something which is accepting or refusing towards people from other continents.

+ *Pan-European Narratives in Estonia*

1.



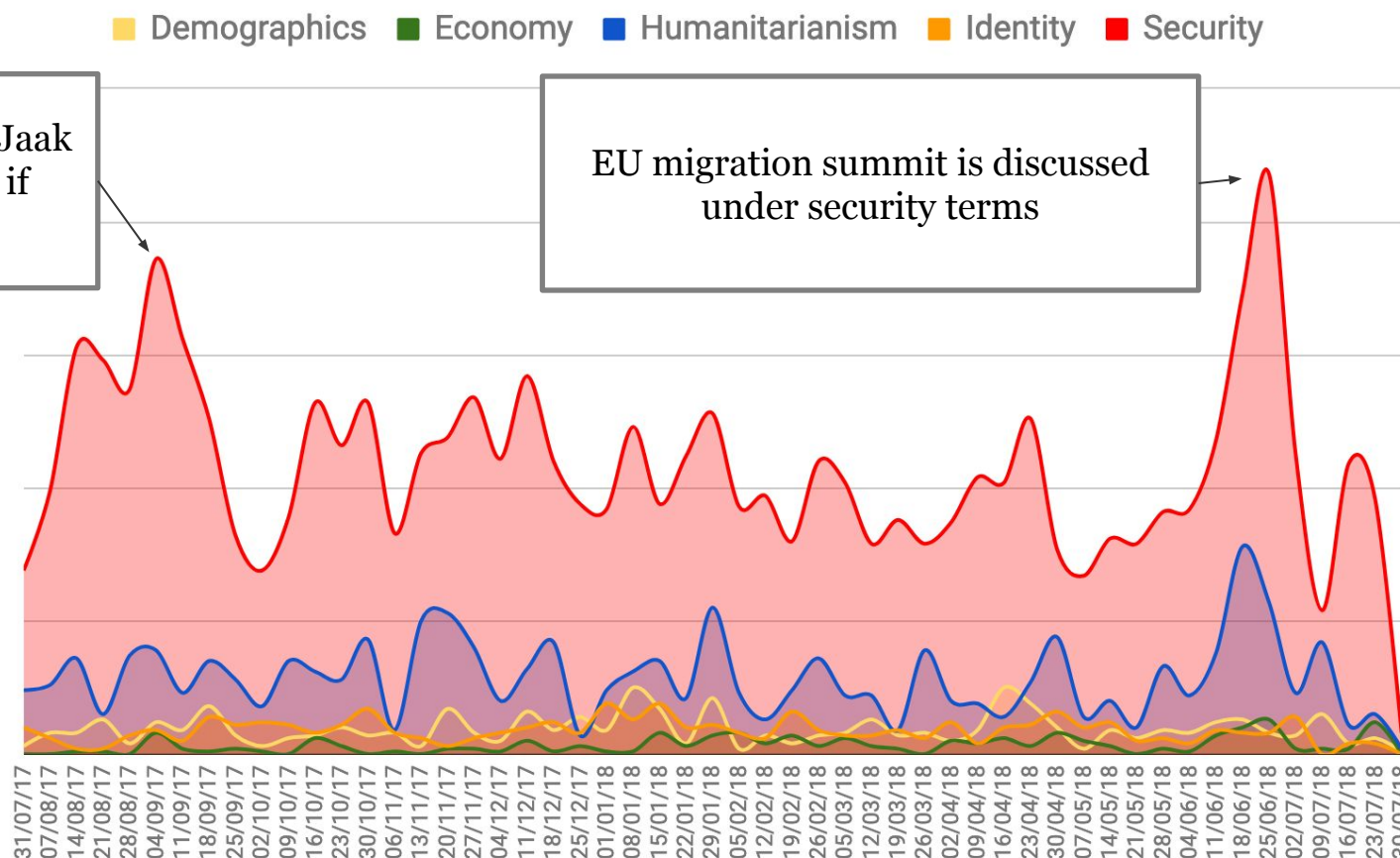
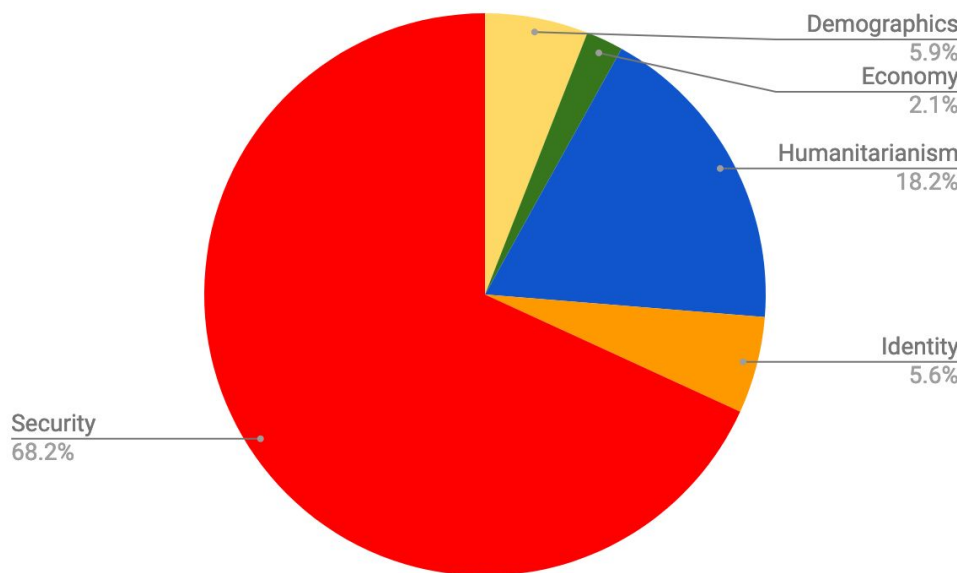
The shape of the migration discourse

The overall composition of the discourse shows that the conversation was highly dominated by security, often influenced by international events. The EU28 migration summit in June 2018 attracted special attention, while the anti-immigrant sentiment in rise throughout Europe escalated in Estonia as well, and was leveraged by right-wing political forces.

Results:
~11k

Conservative politician (EKRE) Jaak Madison proposes #ESTEXIT if Merkel's policies continue

EU migration summit is discussed under security terms



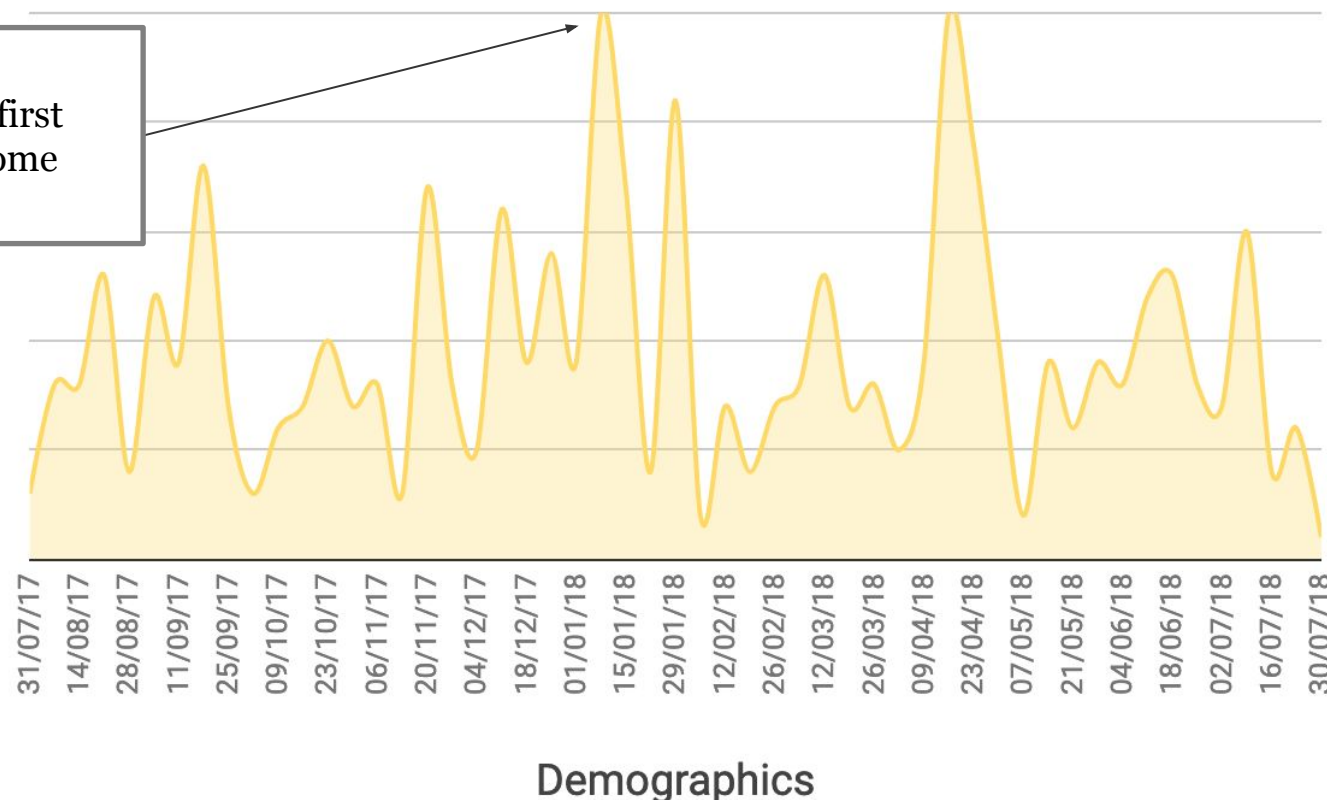
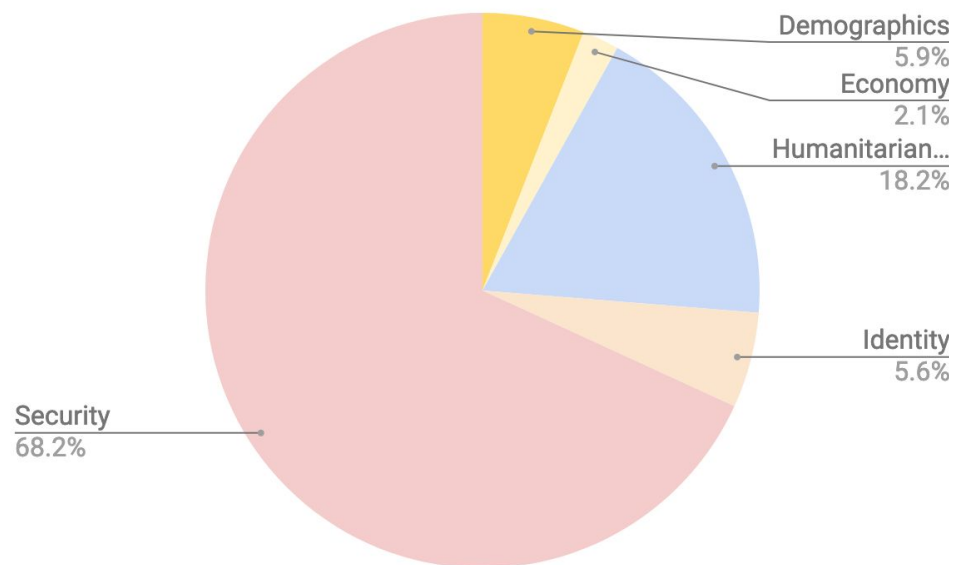
Pan-European Narratives | EE

Demographics (1)

Like other Baltic countries, Estonia also has an **emigration** problem. In relation to the issue, the data shows a discourse that is highly politicized: the reigning government policies are blamed for emigration and are juxtaposed with the failing integration of even the meager number of migrants Estonia received, as well as the perceived failed integration of migrants in other EU countries, arguing that third-world immigration cannot solve the demographic problems.

Results:
~600

Discourse over a migrant family which was first stationed in Estonia, but rather returned home



Pan-European Narratives | EE

Demographics (2)

ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

Demographic policies are judged through the subject of migration

The whole migration regulation is based on the fact that people come and stay here. But there are a lot of those who come for two years only, they have no interest or need to learn Estonian!

*It is even more arguable that the Reform Party who led the country's economically difficult situation, is speculating that the people of Tallinn would like to see **a policy implemented here that has resulted in hundreds of thousands of Estonians leaving their homes and for whose replacement we are advised to open the country to indeterminate migration.***

Madhouse - until recently, they urgently needed the labor force of migrants, now it is necessary to pay social security benefits for migrants!



The images present in the demographic narrative were mostly about politics and politicians expressing an anti-immigrant sentiment through the narrative.

This is opposite to the case in other countries, where demographic concerns were represented by images of people traveling, workers, etc. This shows that **the discourse is highly politicized in Estonia.**

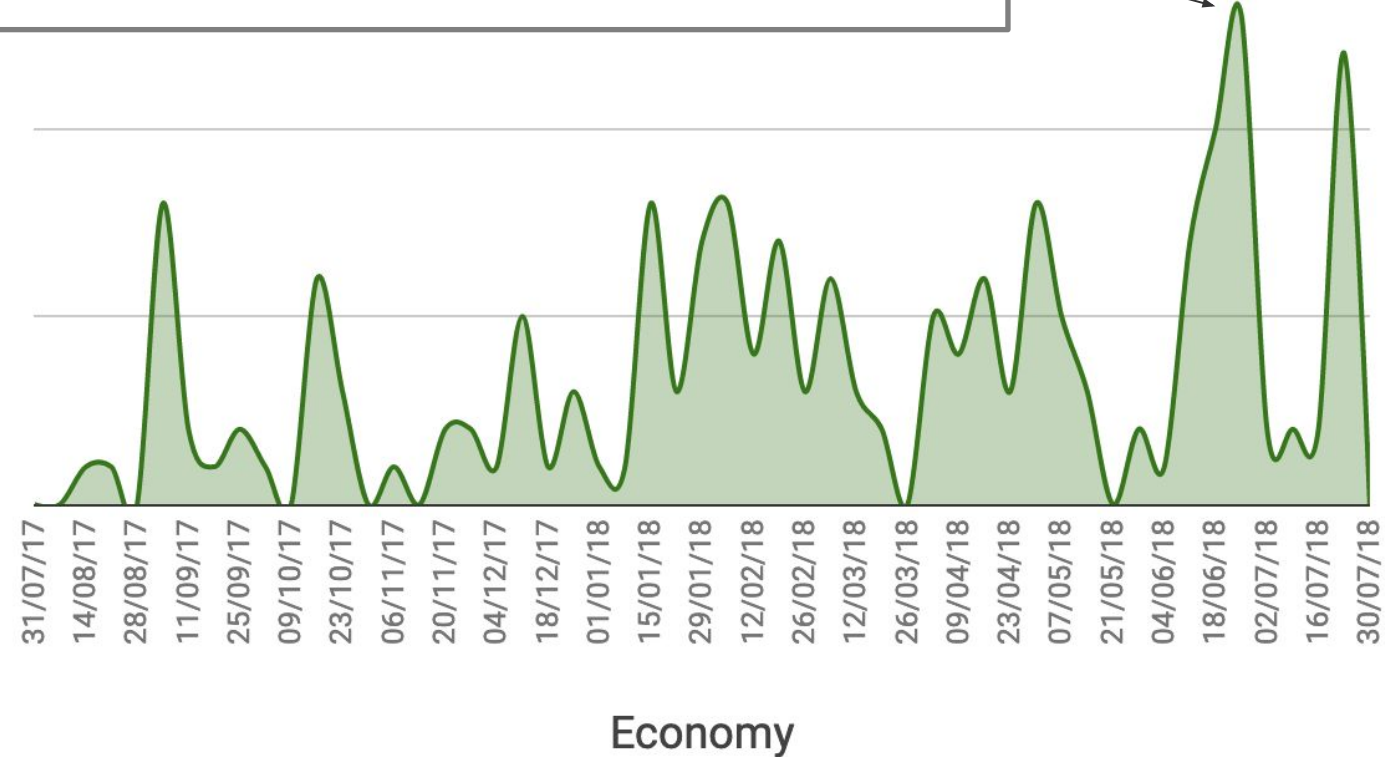
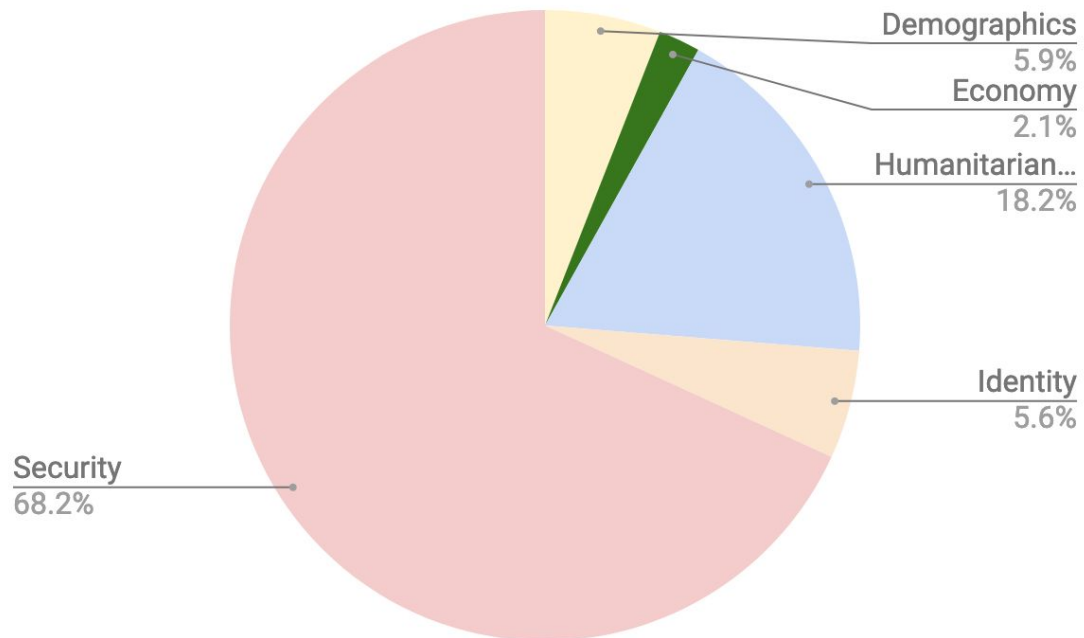
Pan-European Narratives | EE

Economy (1)

The economic narrative, while minor, emphasized a perceived **unfairness in regards to the treatment of the local populace over the aid given to migrants**. As Estonia has a low number of migrants, the discussion was mostly centered around **foreign news and events**, working up in intensity towards the EU summit.

Results:
~1,2k

*Economic costs of migration flare up ahead of the **EU migration summit** in light of Aquarius and US policy changes*



Pan-European Narratives | EE Economy (2)

ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

The economic aspects of migration are used to air other issues of economic unfairness

*“My mother’s grandmother, after spending 40 years in a bog, gets a monthly salary of 950 euros. On the other hand, **a refugee who has not done anything for our country receives a monthly subsidy of 830 euros.**”*

*“Up to 5,000 aliens may be employed in Estonia illegally. **They come here under the visa-free regime, for example from Ukraine or Georgia, and work without a work permit here!**”*

“This challenge is particularly high for immigrants and their descendants. More than 80% of the married couples receiving financial support from the state are of non - western origin. If immigrants and their descendants worked the same way as people of Danish origin, Denmark would receive several billion kroons each year!”



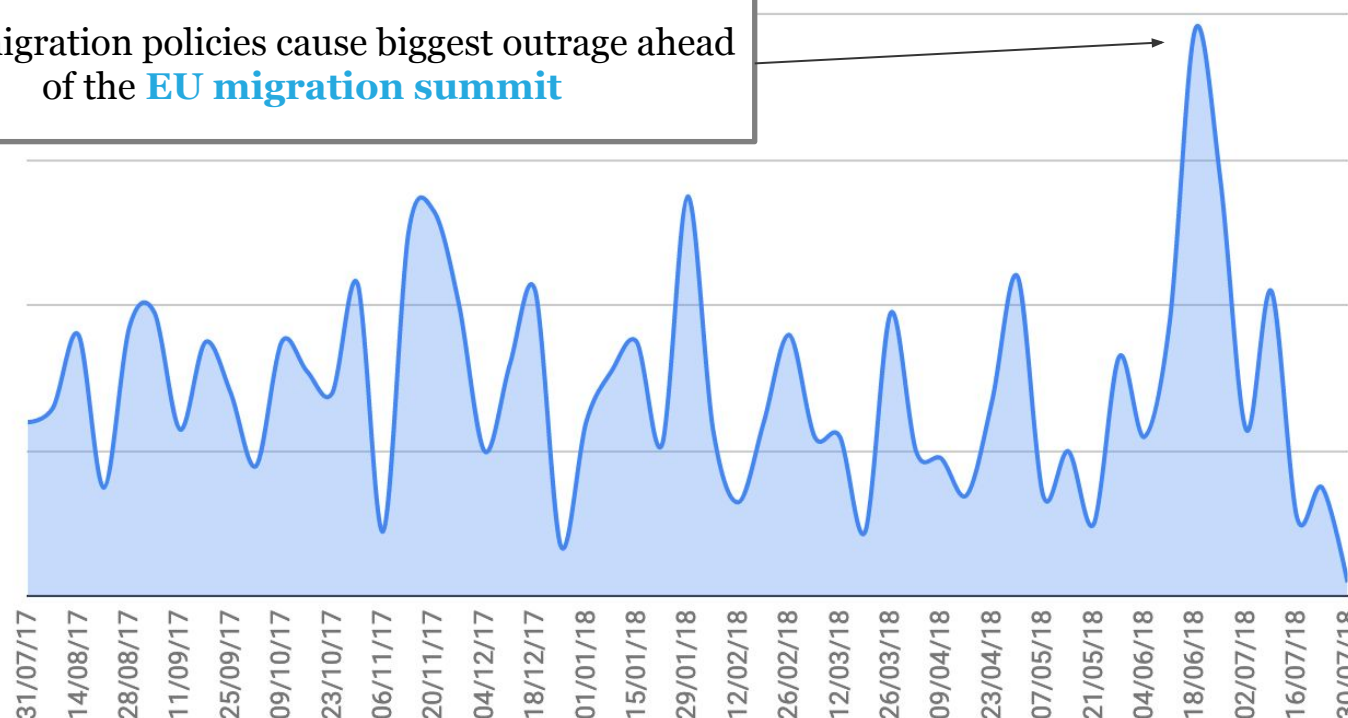
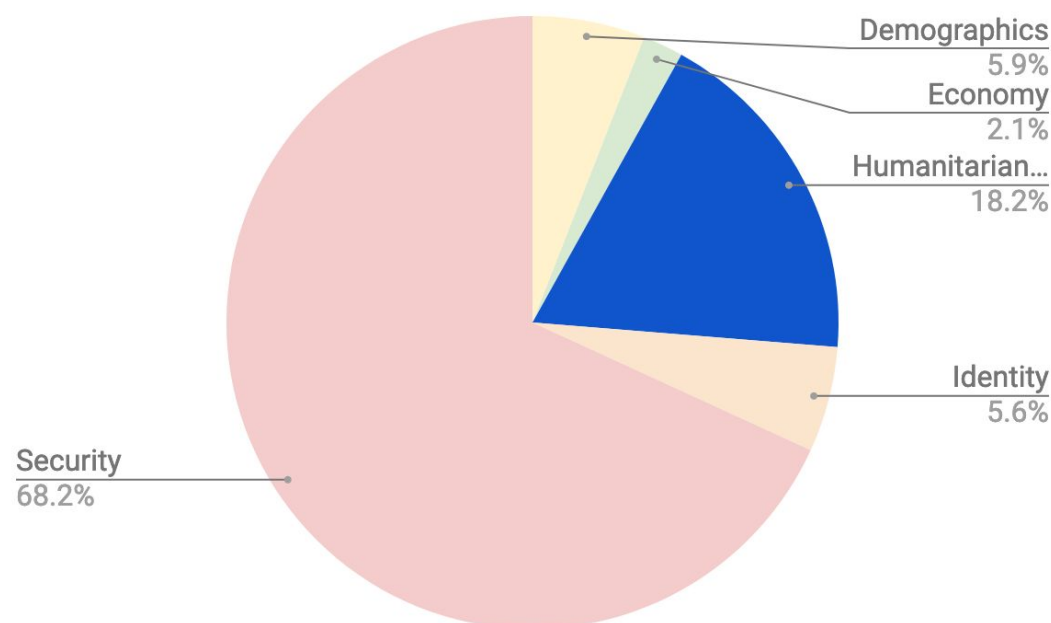
The images present in the economic discourse highlight EU politicians - those who are against immigration and those who are perceived to be a part of the reigning economic elite, further emphasizing **the role of migration as a political tool.**

Pan-European Narratives | EE Humanitarianism (1)

Humanitarianism was the second biggest narrative, however it was overshadowed by other concerns over migration overall - security, demographics and identity. The curve of the discourse followed **international events and politics**, mostly focusing on either Angela Merkel, Donald Trump or the wider humanitarian cost of present and future migration policies around the world, peaking around the EU summit.

Results:
~1,5k

US immigration policies cause biggest outrage ahead of the **EU migration summit**



Humanitarianism

Pan-European Narratives | EE

Humanitarianism (2)

PRO-MIGRANT VOICES

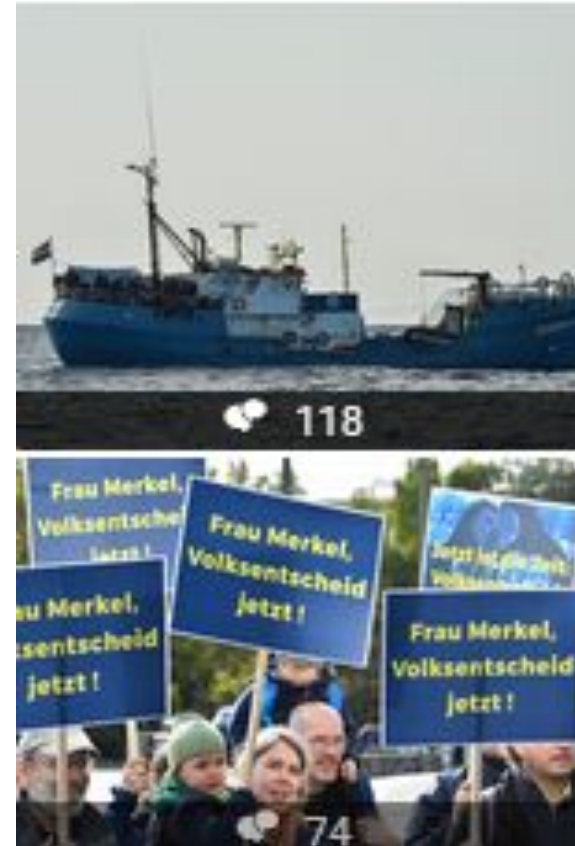
Humanitarianism expresses an escalating crisis

*“On 15 November, **2982 migrants have sunk at the Mediterranean** on their way to Europe, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) announced on Friday in Geneva.”*

*“The guiding principle of each migration policy should be the **protection of children's interests.**”*

*“**Europe is still anxious about migration, but it is only a small part of an expanding global refugee crisis.***

Millions leave their homes, whether due to either contaminated living conditions, wars, hunger, or simply an invitation to a better life.”



Images present in the humanitarian discourse expressed a **shock over the humane cost of migration policies worldwide**, and the political turmoil that they cause – whether it takes place at European or African coastlines, or costs Angela Merkel her political career.

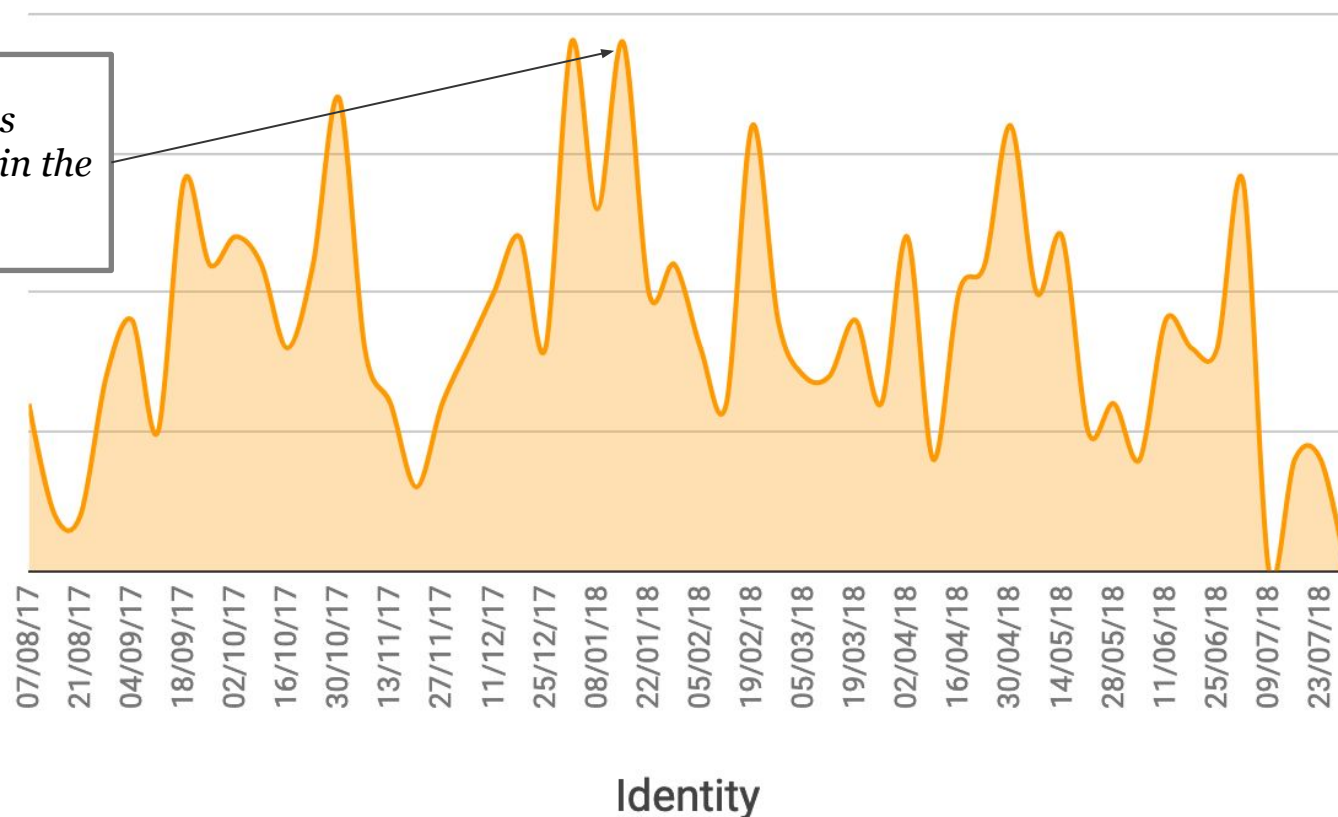
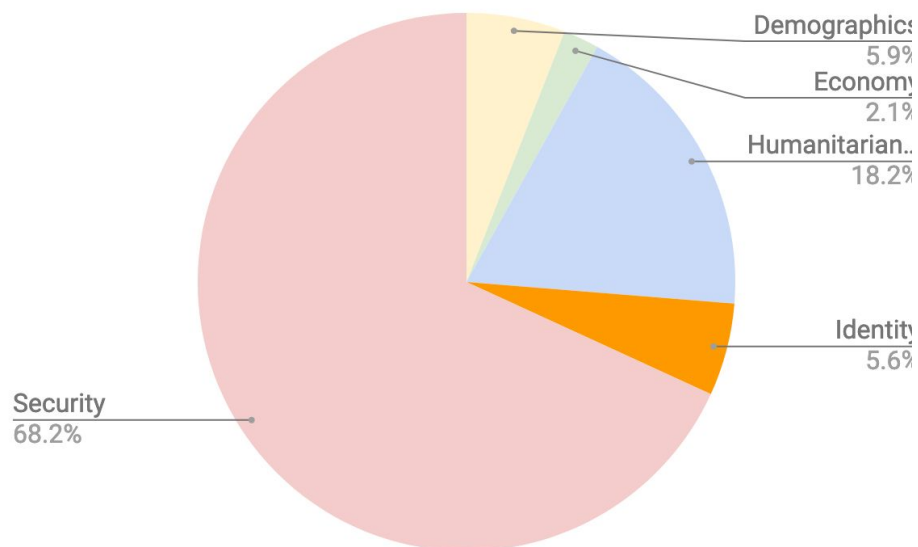
Pan-European Narratives | EE

Identity and Customs (1)

The identity narrative mostly served as a **mirror to discuss the wider implications of migration and rising nationalism in the EU**. Some explicitly questioned whether migration is the real threat to Europe, highlighting how internal struggles like the rise of right-wing populism are more worrisome, while others raised concerns over the perceived failures of multiculturalism and associated politicians, such as Angela Merkel as an advocate and Donald Trump as a challengers.

Results:
~600

The shift in the US migration policies sparks conversations that mirror the shifting attitudes in the Baltics



Pan-European Narratives | EE

Identity and Customs (2)

The migration question is primarily a crisis for European identity

“Africa is not a boogeyman with which to scare white European children!”

*“When you go to another country, you realize how long it takes for immigrants to spend time somewhere in other countries and cultures and how difficult it is.
#EUandMe #FutureofEurope”*

“We worship immigrant economic refugees coming from a foreign culture.”



The images present within the identity narrative show a politicized landscape, as perceived **failures of migration policies** are discussed (such as that of Merkel) while highlighting **successful capitalizations of the subject by nationalist movements** (such as that of the national-conservative ERKE in Estonia) - pairing up with **overall anxieties over the future identity of Europe**.



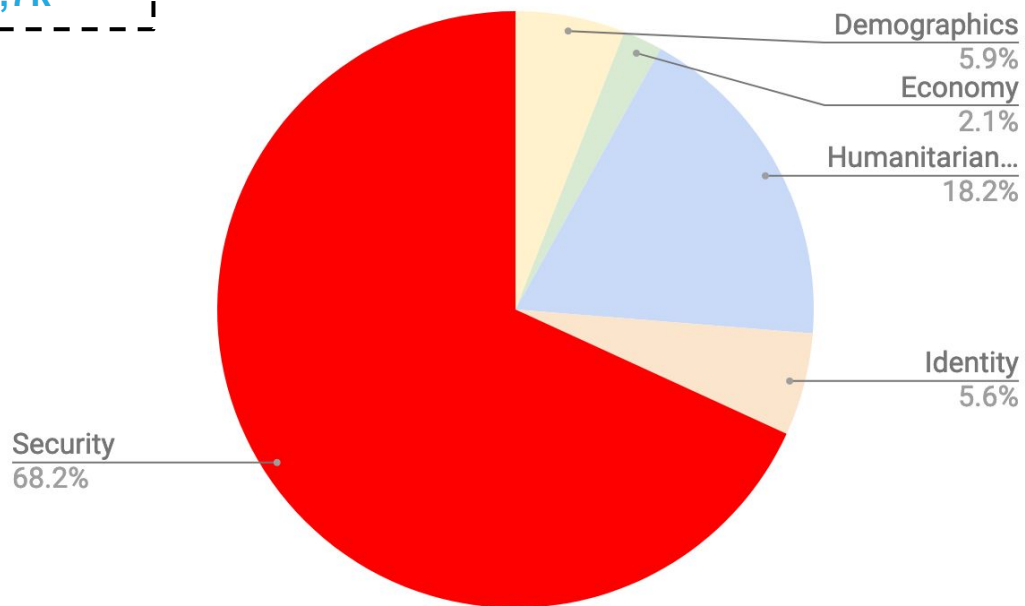
Pan-European Narratives | EE

Security (1)

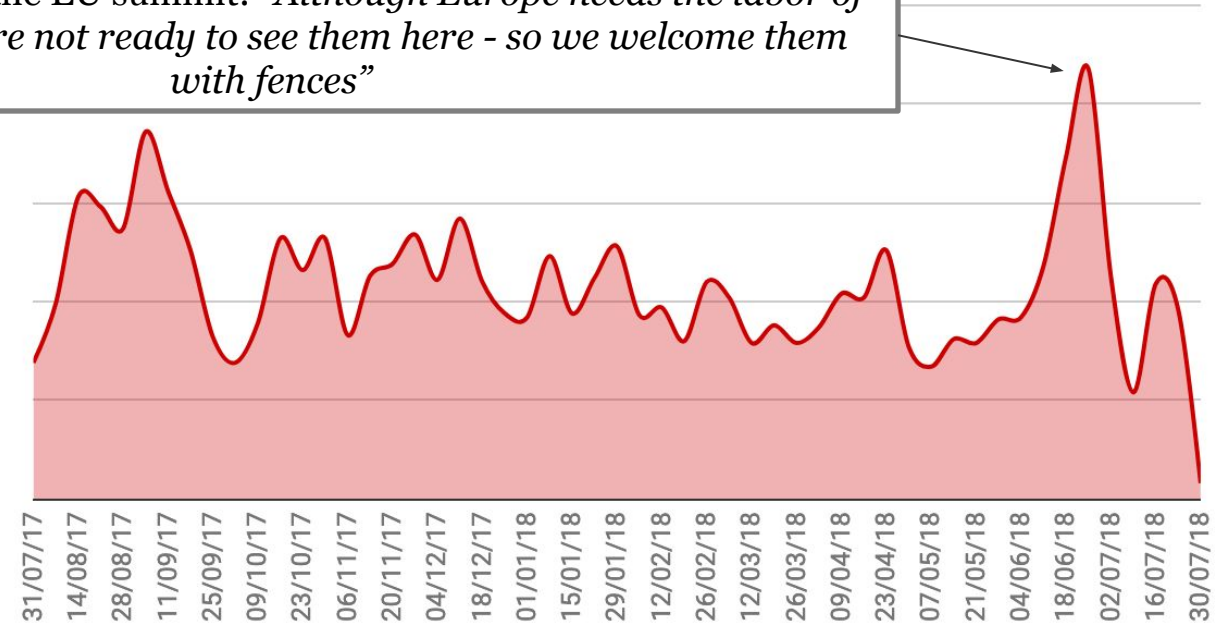
Estonia is marked in various surveys as the most migration-opposing country, and this is reinforced by the current data. Majority of the discourse appeared in the security narrative, which was exclusively anti-migrant, **portraying stories of migrants as a security threat**. This was mostly discussed in the context of international events, or with the presentation of migrants in other countries (notably Sweden and Germany).

An underlying theme within this was the **geopolitics of Russia, as migration was seen as a deployed weapon to destabilize the region**.

Results:
~5,7k



Cartoon regarding the EU summit: "Although Europe needs the labor of immigrants, we are not ready to see them here - so we welcome them with fences"



Security

Pan-European Narratives | EE Security (2)

ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

Migration is seen as a threat to national and international security, and policing against it is welcomed

“We are told, by the way, that they are not shot only in the immigrant districts but also elsewhere; as if, in other words, it would seem that the real and the native Swedes themselves were also shooting.”

*“Undersecretary of the Ministry of Internal Affairs Police and Migration Policy Raivo Küüt said that the **drones are part of the entire border construction project to ensure that the Estonian, European and, at the same time, NATO, external borders are firmly protected.**”*

“The V4 leaders have opposed the policy of mass influx of immigrants in Brussels, and the attitude was supported by voters.”



The images present in the security discourse show the “**international front**” of nationalist politicians, such as Kurz, Orbán or local firebrand **Jaak Madison** who want to protect their people from the threat of migration and are juxtaposed with George Soros, who by their accord is behind the plot to “flood Europe with migrants” highlighting the political nature of the migration subject in Estonia.

+ *Local Issues in Estonia Around Migration*



2.

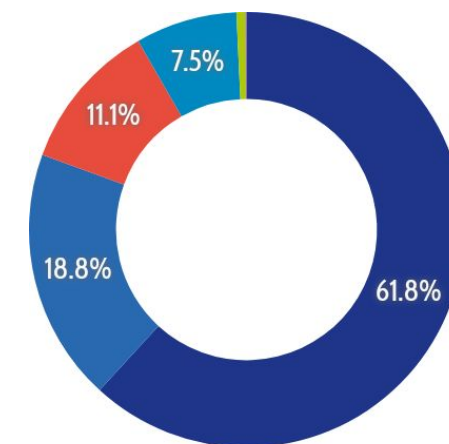
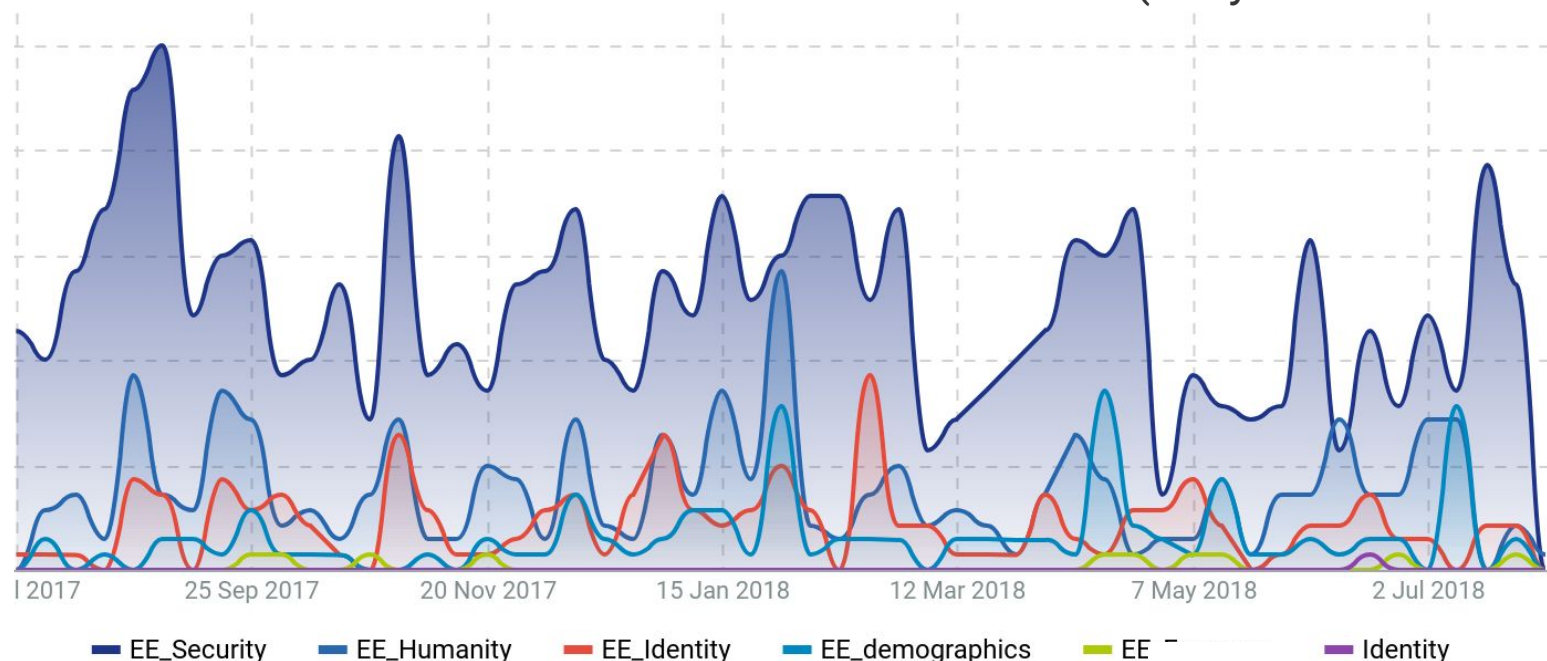


Russia Looms in the Background

While the overall discourse seemed heavily polarized towards immigration, Russia was invoked in 18% of the entire conversation, highlighting Russia as a more immediate concern present in Estonia in the background: a concern expressed primarily through security.

The curve of the Russia mentions also moved differently from the entire conversation as the peaks didn't follow EU politics but rather local news, while it maintained the composition - with a dominance in security and humanitarian concerns tied to the actions of Russia abroad (in Syria and Crimea).

Results:
~2k



- EE_Security
- EE_Humanity
- EE_Identity
- EE_demographics
- EE_Economy

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



3.

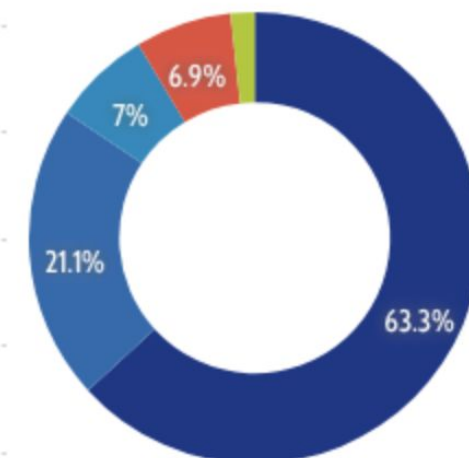
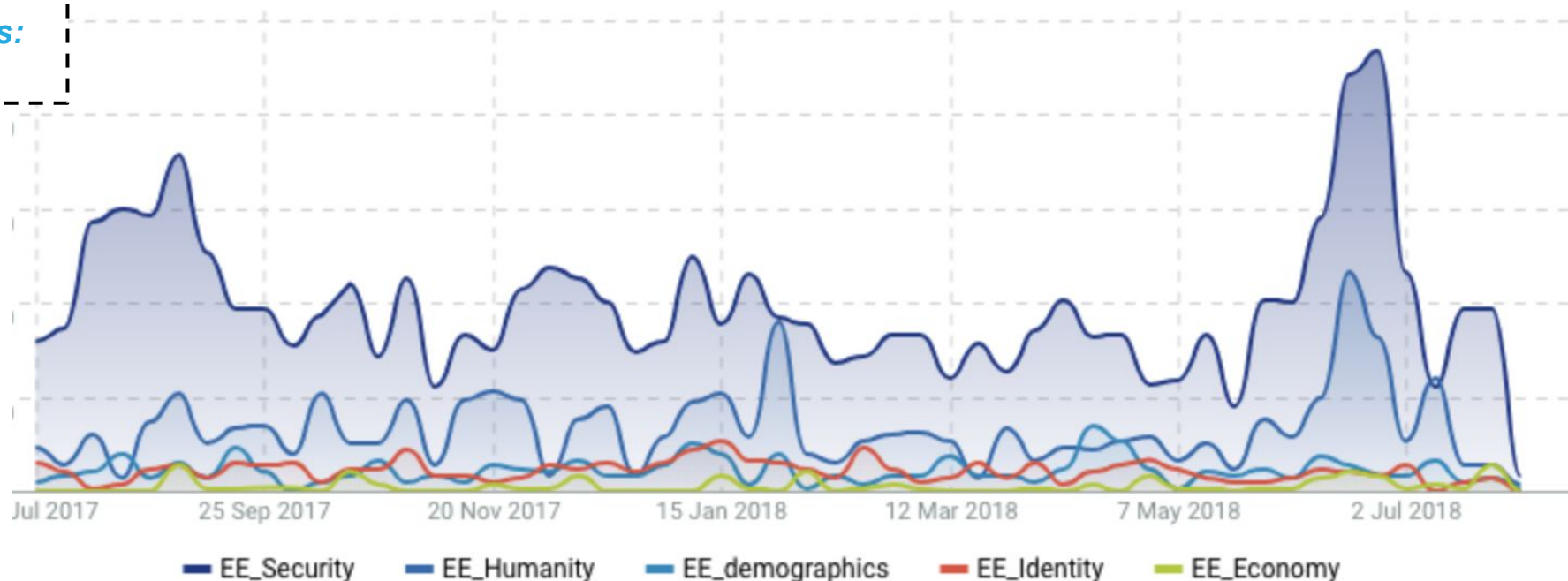


European and Domestic Politics Context within Narratives | EE

Migration: Primarily a Subject of EU Politics

Invoked over 50% of the time, **European politics are a key driver in the Estonian migration discourse**. Given the low number of migrants in the country, this is not that surprising, but shows that **migration is considered to be a part of EU-level political battles**. This is also illustrated by the fact that the subject within this context is highly securitized and gears up towards the EU migration summit, with a sharp fall afterwards in intensity.

Results:
~6,2k



● EE_Security
● EE_Humanity
● EE_demographics
● EE_Identity
● EE_Economy

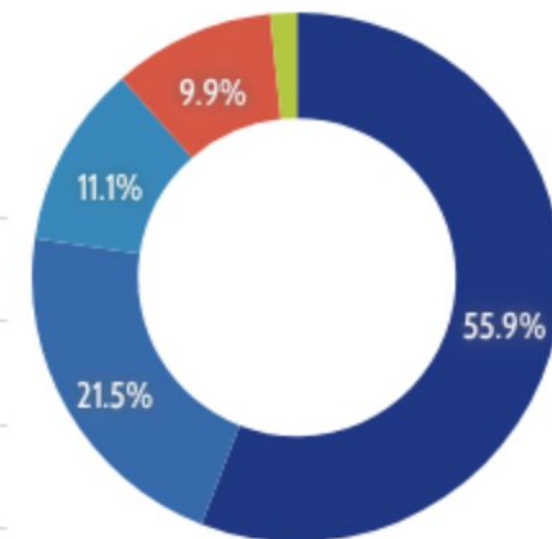
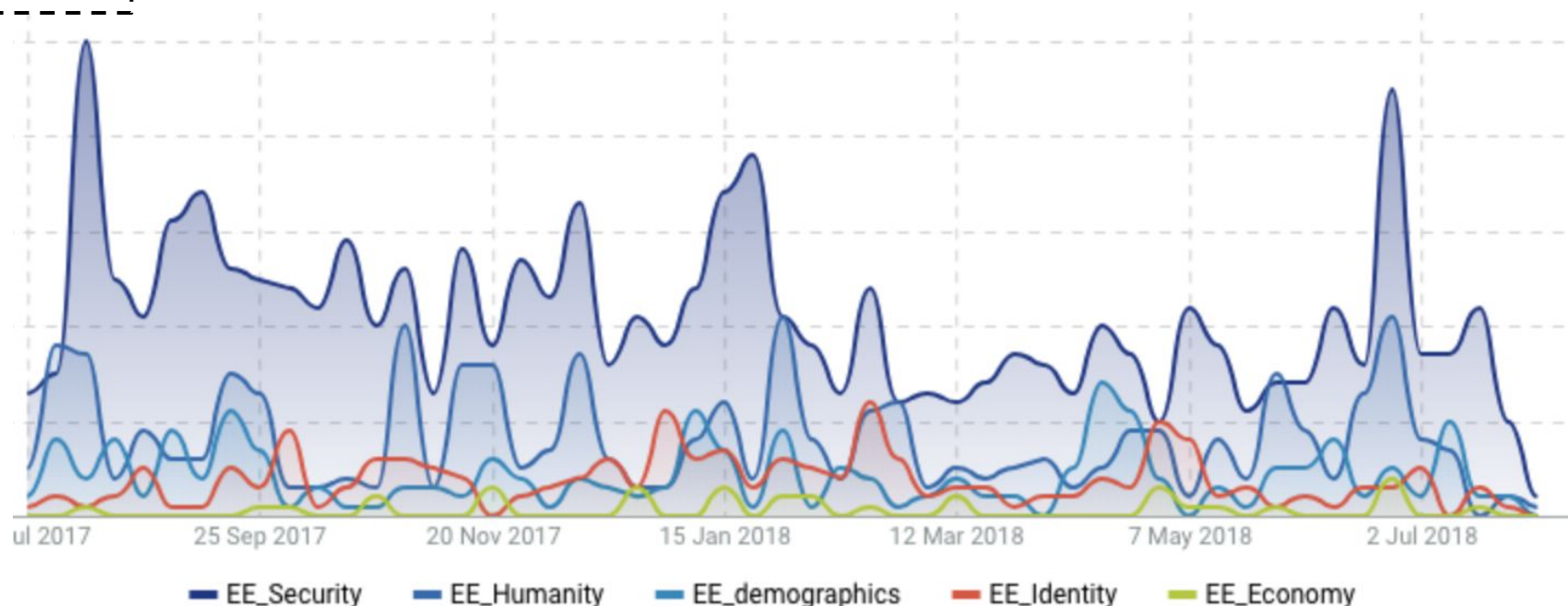


European and Domestic Politics Context within Narratives | EE

Migration: A Domestic Political Tool

Domestic politics were invoked in the migration discourse around 22% of the time, showing that the subject was mostly discussed in international terms. However, by looking at the composition of the discourse, we can see that the challenging opinion that **talks about securitization overpowers that of the more humanitarian approach followed by the government**, with an intensity curve that is only loosely related to the EU summit. This means that migration has become a successful political tool domestically in Estonia.

Results:
~2,5k



- EE_Security
- EE_Humanity
- EE_demographics
- EE_Identity
- EE_Economy

+ *Conversation Channels*



4.

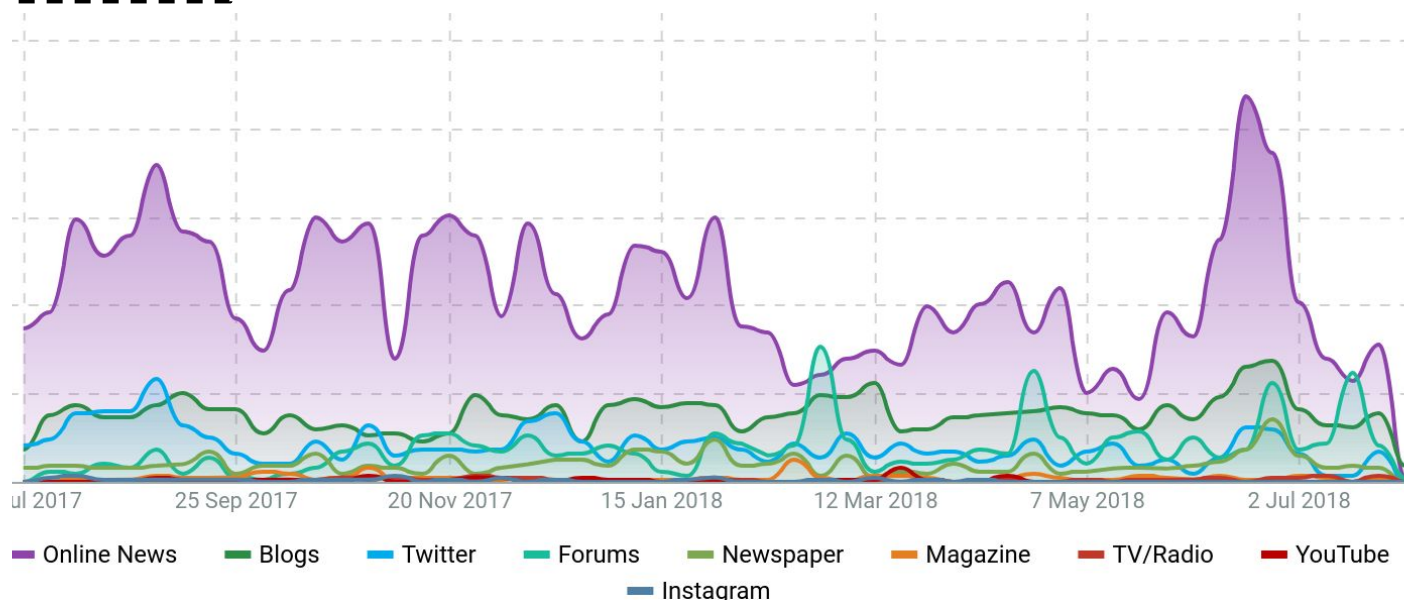


Channel Distribution | EE

Online News Commands The Largest Share

The Estonian discourse occurred primarily through **online news**, although boards of user generated content such as that of **blogs, Twitter or forums ended up balancing the landscape**. Compared to the wider narrative trends, we can see that online news followed international events and was cued to focus on the EU28 migration summit, while multiple high profile incidents happened from the US to Italy and Spain.

Results:
~11k



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