

Migration Narratives in Europe

A Social Media Intelligence Study

Country report for Kingdom of Belgium



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

- 2019 -

Context of Belgian migration discourse

- Belgium has served as the capital of the European Union (former European Economic Community) since the end of the 1950s and, as of 2015, has a **population of about 11,258,434**. At its peak, official **asylum seekers in the country made up 0.37% of the population**.*
- The public social media conversation in Belgium around migration in one year consists of ~360,256 posts. Compared to population size, **the conversation on migration in Belgium is the 16th largest in the EU**.
- The administration since 2014 is a centre-right coalition of the **New Flemish Alliance** (N-VA), the **Christian Democratic and Flemish**, the **Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats** and the **Reformist Movement**. The prime minister is **Charles Michel**. The N-VA's tough policies and stances on migration are a large factor in the conversation.
- The Walloons express empathy for migration while the Flemish are increasingly anxious about the security issues concerning EU migration policies.



*Source: europarl.europa.eu



Introduction | BE

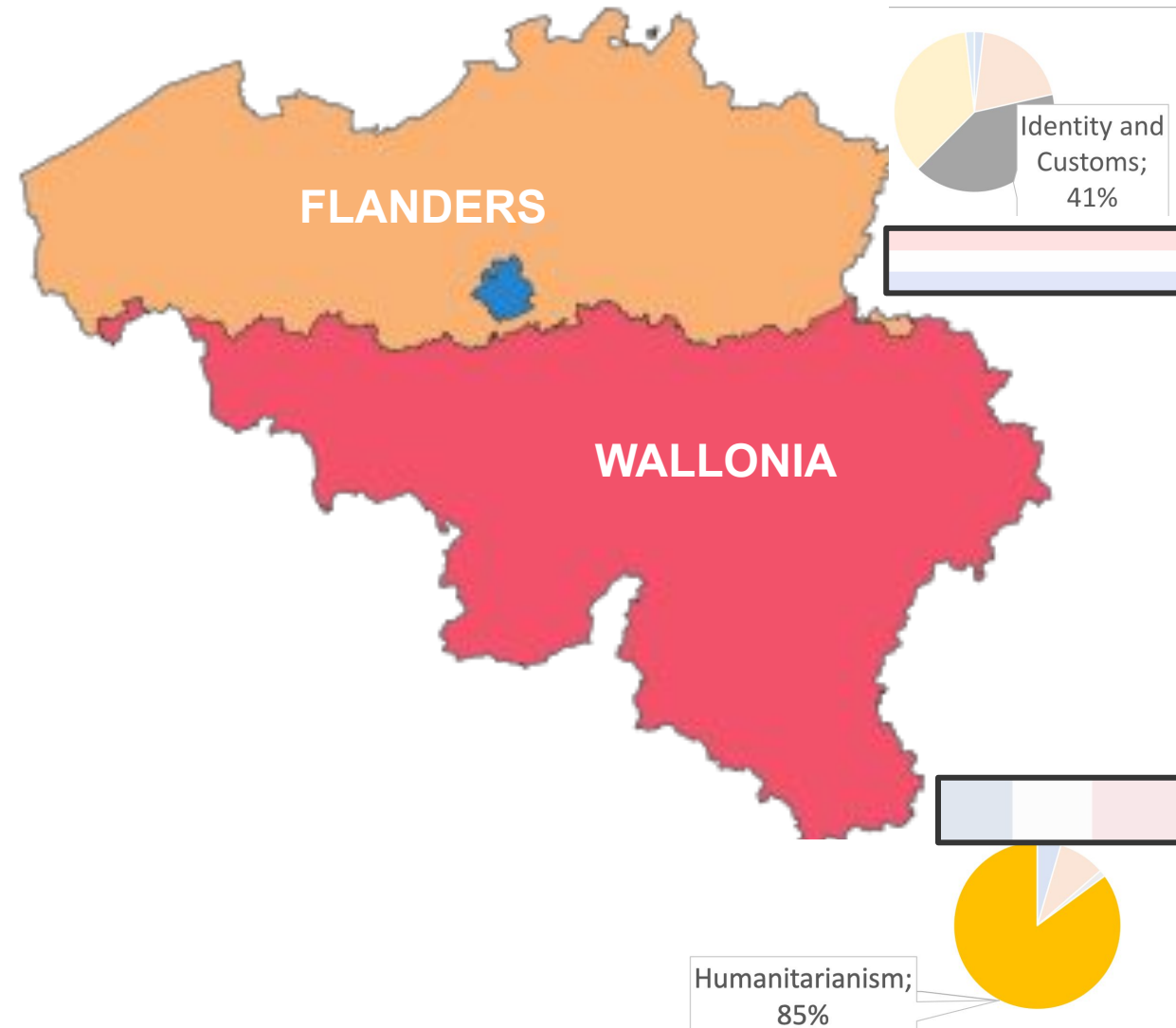
Two Countries in One

Belgium is historically divided into two regions: Flanders and Wallonia. Just as they are different culturally and economically, the conversation around migration splits along regional lines.

While Wallonia boasts a proud heritage of immigration and thus emphasizes the humanitarian aspects of the question from a pro-migrant point of view, the discussion of wealthier Flanders is fueling nationalist sentiments in the region through the perceived threat of immigration to identity.

The longer question over the partition of Belgium is thus mirrored in the conversation on migration: instead of weighing the pros and cons of each narrative, the regions are having separate discussions from opposing points of view.

The figurehead of this is **Theo Francken of the N-VA** government party, who polarizes the country through his actions and rhetoric along the lines of humanitarianism, identity and security, provoking support from the Flemish and opposition from the Wallonians.





Key Findings | BE

How and Where Do Belgians Discuss Migration in the Social Media Space?

Size of Pan-European Narratives

Humanitarianism in Wallonia clashes with the identity and customs narrative in Flanders, as completely different aspects of the migration question are discussed in Belgium with opposing attitudes.

Local Issues

The historical drifting apart in Belgium is continued under the discussion of migration. While **Wallonia embraces their heritage of acceptance, Theo Francken of the New Flemish Alliance is building a platform of independence** using the subject.

EU & Domestic Politics

Both Walloons and Flemish consider **the migration crisis to be more of an international issue than a domestic problem**. However, Flemish are more likely to believe migration is a domestic political matter.

Discussion Tone

The discussion tone reflects the difference between the two parts of Belgium: while French-speaking Walloons discuss migration in a reserved manner, Dutch-speaking Flemish demonstrate intense emotions when discussing the topic.

Conversation Channels

The majority of the discussion takes place on **Twitter**, driven by political forums and established journalist outlets.

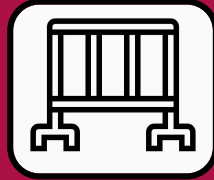


Key Findings | BE

Pan-European Narratives in the Belgian Context



The small economic discussion in Belgium is split along regional borders, with Flemish people expressing frustration that they have historically footed the bill for the Walloons, giving a specific tone to the migration discourse.



Security concerns regarding migrants are driven by Theo Francken and his policies, positioned as realistic but perceived as anti-humanitarian by many.



Identity and customs is the biggest conversation for Flanders, who have done a great deal to bolster their own identity and autonomy in recent history. As such, migration is viewed as a threat to their values.



Walloons, however, have a rich heritage of migration, and are thus concerned with the humanitarian aspects of EU and domestic politics of managing migration and helping asylum seekers.



The demographic aspects of migration were in general mostly absent from the discourse, regardless of region.

+ *Pan-European Narratives in Belgium*



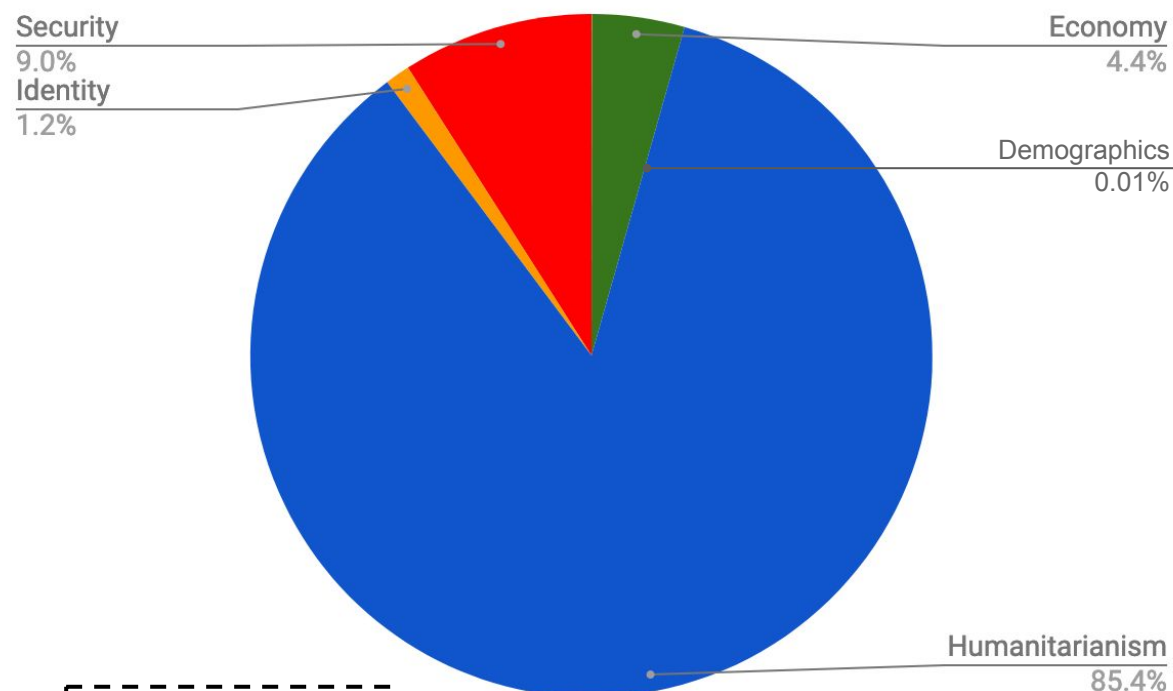
1.



Pan-European Narratives | BE

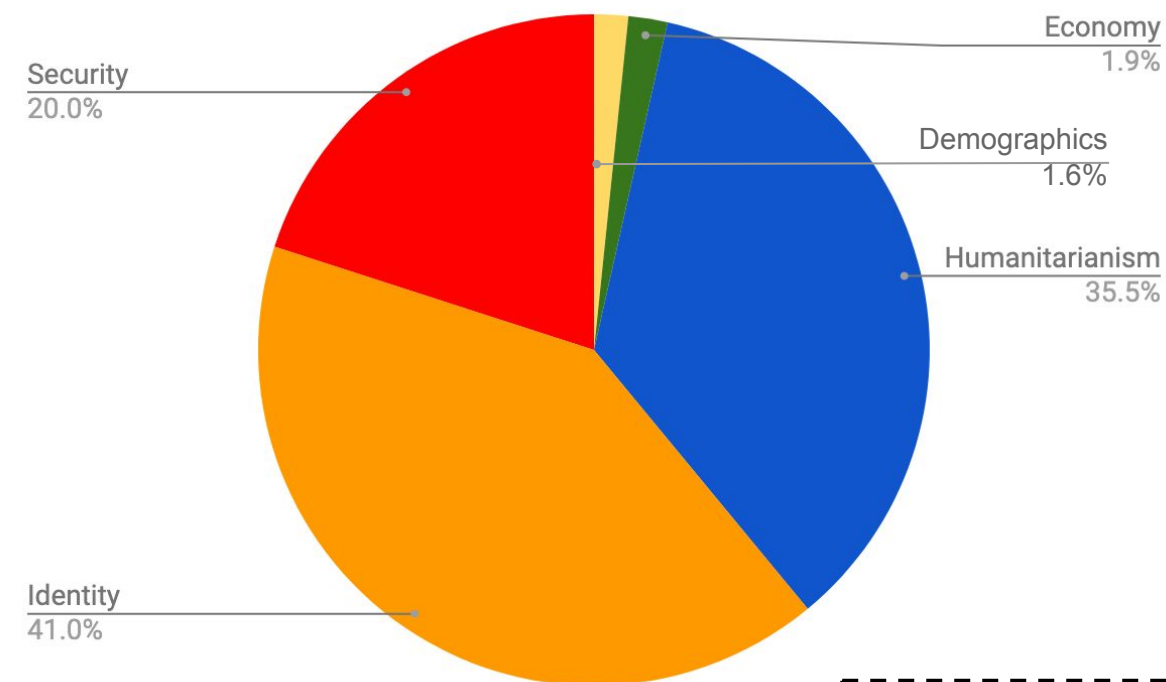
Humanitarian Wallonia vs. Identity of Flanders

While humanitarianism is a shared sentiment between the two regions, aspects of humanitarianism in Wallonia clash with the viewpoint of identity in Flanders regarding migration. This opposition reflects the historical divide and local independence efforts present in the country.



French Results:
~172,800

French conversation



Dutch Results:
~187,500

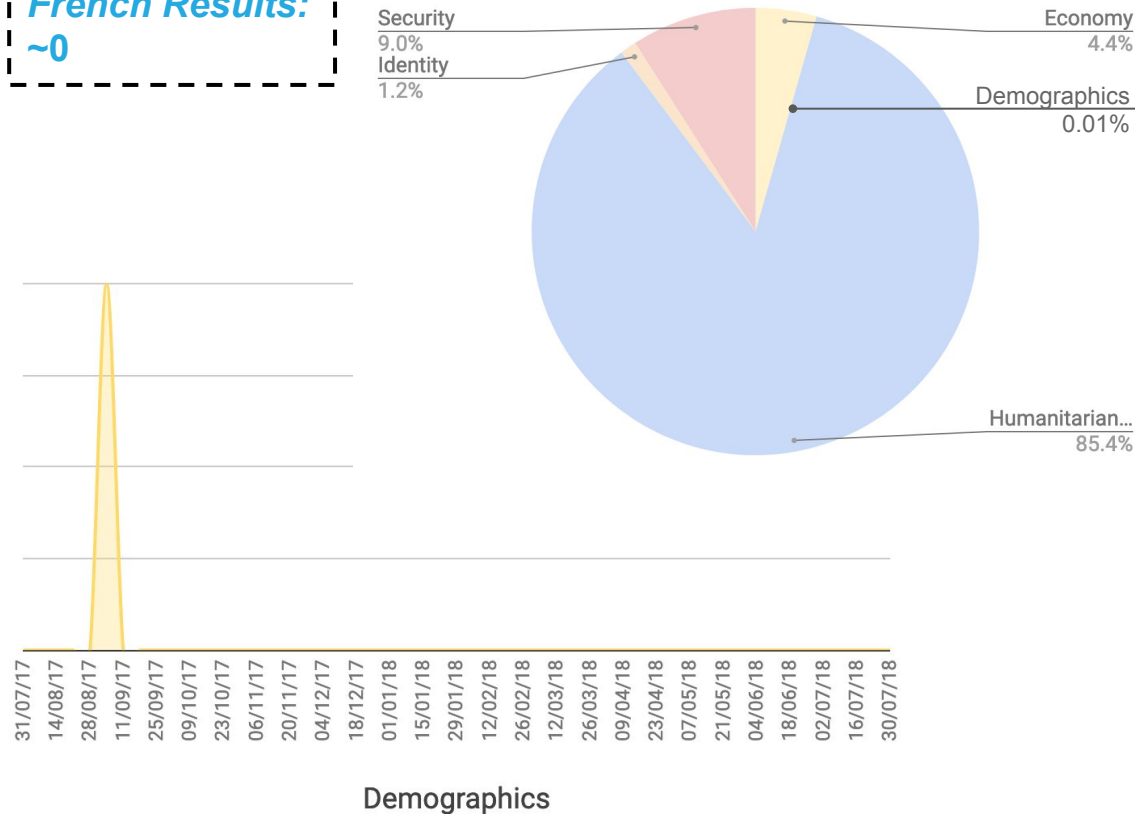
Dutch conversation

Pan-European Narratives | BE

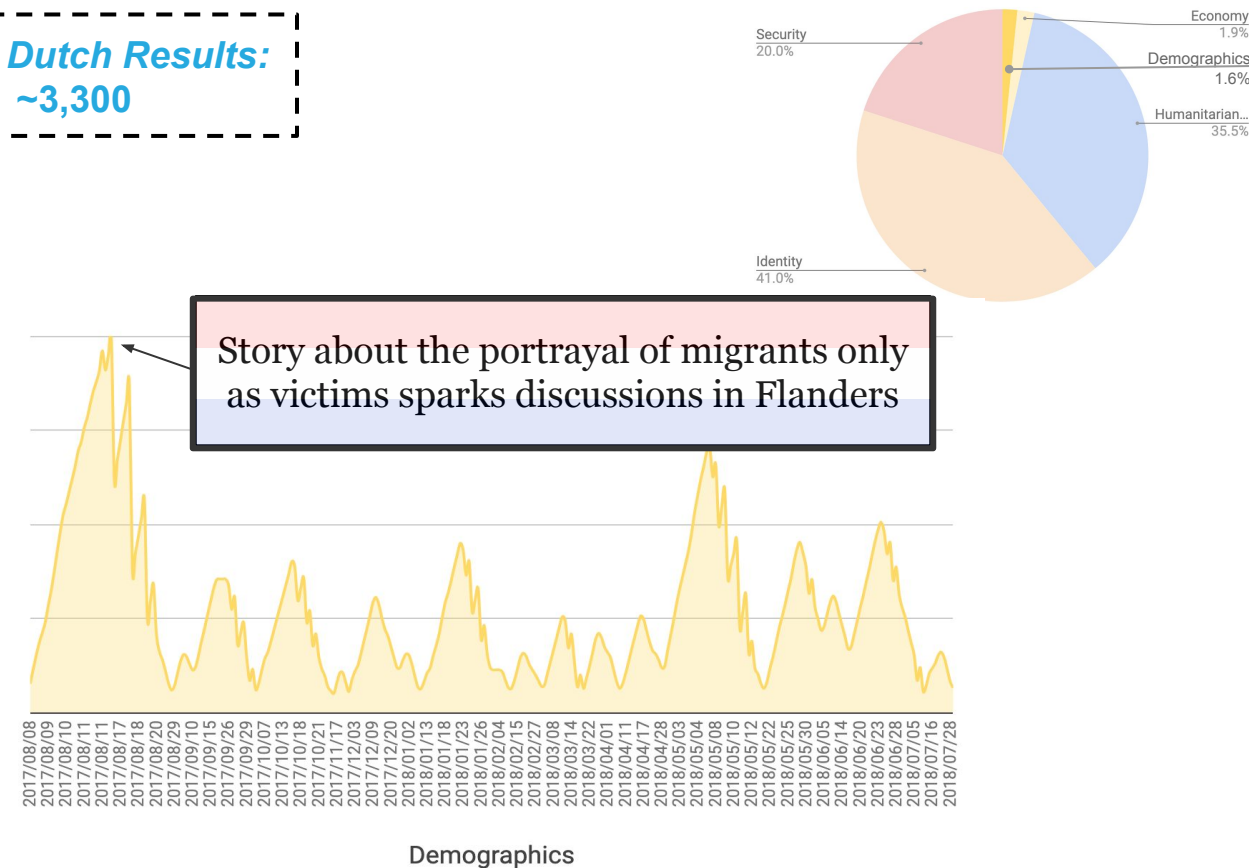
Demographics (1)

Interestingly, **the conversation on the demographic impact of migration in Belgium is completely absent in the French conversations**, though there are a few conversations discussing the topic in Dutch. Worries over the potential negative implications of the aging Belgian population do not appear to be present, and there are almost no conversations about the integration of migrants to the Belgian labour market.

French Results:
~0



Dutch Results:
~3,300



ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

Some people claim that integration via work is mandatory in Belgian society...

*"Reduce the aid to immigrants when they make insufficient efforts to integrate, **to get a job themselves.**"*

*"Migrants who have **never worked** should not receive any benefits!"*

PRO-MIGRANT VOICES

...while other groups, some with interests emphasize migration's positive role in the workforce

*There are obviously a lot of refugees who want to **work, integrate and contribute** to our society.*

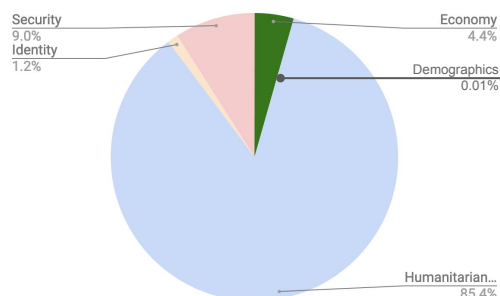
*"Getting Started with refugees", available on paper and in pdf. You as employers may be interested in **recruiting a refugee**. How do you handle this? Info in the document."*

Pan-European Narratives | BE

Economy (1)

The economic narrative is quite small compared to the rest of the discussion. Conversations within this narrative often discuss the welfare state and its financing, which ties into the greater discourse of “transfers” – tax transfer from wealthier Flanders to Wallonia. While migration is mostly considered a beneficial aspect of a working economy, within the economic discourse in Belgium it highlights existing tensions over economic rationality or societal justice - mostly in Flanders. Wallonians discussed the economy through a foreign story that went viral.

French Results:
~7,900

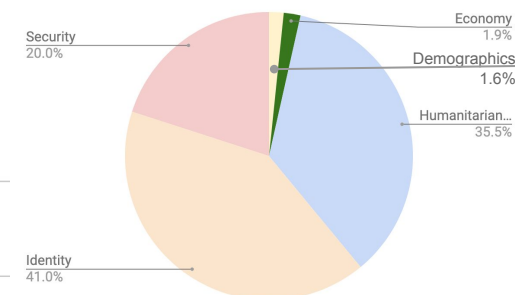


Magic Johnson and Samuel L Jackson are mistaken for lazy migrants shopping for luxury bags in Italy, goes viral in BE

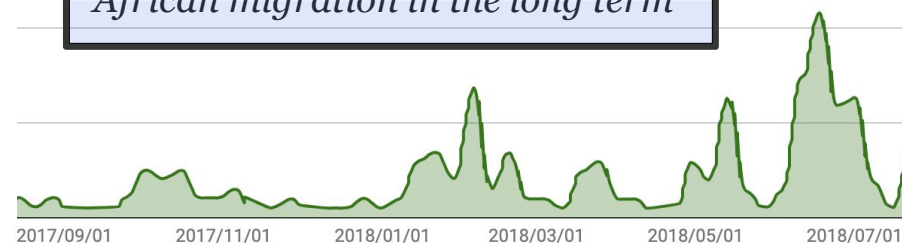


Economy

Dutch Results:
~3,500



“Europe’s economy can benefit from African migration in the long term”



Economy



ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

The ever-growing budget for migrant expulsion poses an increasingly large burden on the economy

*“Despite decreasing number of cases, the **budget for repatriations** is constantly increasing. We went from 63 million dedicated to forced returns in 2014 to 85 million in 2018.”*

It is unfair that refugees receive social services for free while locals must pay for them

*“**Migrants receive 40 € a day to eat!** – says a radiologist who performs tuberculosis checks for refugees – and they are treated for free, **while a regular Belgian citizen must pay to eat and get treatment!**”*

Refugees would have expected even more economic benefits in Europe

*We had an issue with Iraqis, who returned home. **No doubt because they noticed a difference between what the smugglers had promised them and what they saw.***

PRO-MIGRANT VOICES

Migration is an important part of the economy, with real problems lying elsewhere

*“World Bank economists say more open **migration** policy would **reduce** global **inequality** even further.”*

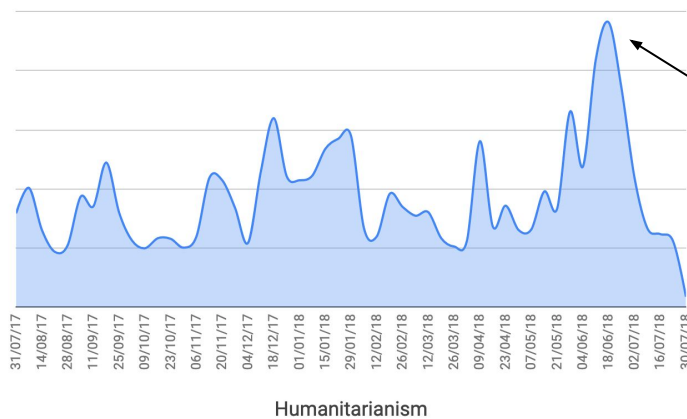
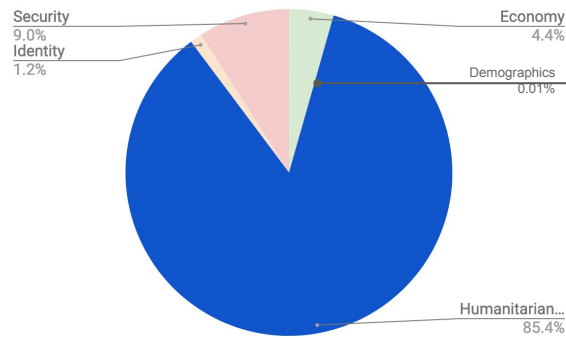
*“**Migrant workers are important for the economy** of the western european countries”*

*“Half of our taxes go directly into the pockets of our ministers... **economic refugees (who work) are anything but the issue...**”*

Pan-European Narratives | BE Humanitarianism (1)

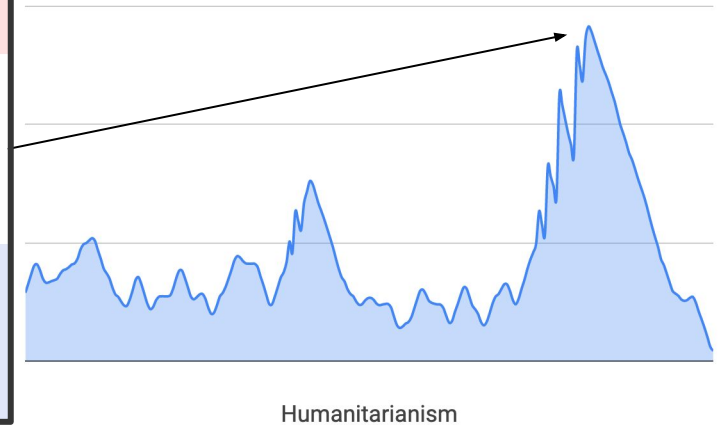
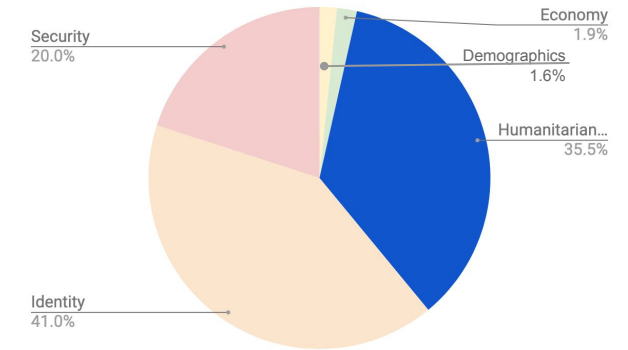
Due to Wallonia's history with immigration, they are sympathetic to the plight of migrants and humanitarianism dominates their discourse. In Flanders, although Theo Francken is trying to brand the N-VA's policies as humanitarian, it can be shown from the discourse that the narrative comes out as a backlash against his actions and rhetoric.

French Results:
~147,000



Migrant crisis: A lot of people drowned in the Mediterranean sea – action is needed, especially as Matteo Salvini rejects rescue ships

Dutch Results:
~67,000



"Illegal migrants arriving in Spain: there are large numbers from Bangladesh. That is 9,000 km from Libya + there is NO war. They fly via Turkey to Tripoli and then by boat to the EU. What right do they have to get into the EU? What are we doing ?!" - Theo Francken on Aquarius

Pan-European Narratives | BE

Humanitarianism (2)



ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

Keep them off our streets

I will not accept allowing #ParcMaximilien to become a “transit hub” for illegal migrants. And I am willing to make every effort to ensure that these illegal migrants leave this park forever!

Our policies are humane and provide assistance to migrants

*“We save everyone in the Mediterranean, but **we send them back to Africa. Not to countries at war, but to reception centers in Africa, funded by the EU, and with all the necessary comfort. We will not put them in danger.**”*

PRO-MIGRANT VOICES

Actual humane solutions are needed instead of policing

*~2000 people came tonight to build a huge **human chain** around #Maximilien #Brussels Park, **to ensure that refugees’ rights are respected.** And good news: tomorrow's police raid is canceled! Thank you all, you're great 😊 #Solidarity #PlatformCitoyenne*

*Several thousands of people marched on Sunday in Brussels, as part of the event "Human Wave for solidarity and humanity", calling for a policy of asylum and migration that is more "human". According to the police, **around 10,000 people attended the march. It ended at Maximilien Park where volunteers have been working for months to help refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.***

***"European migration policies lead to thousands of deaths in the Mediterranean and Belgium will hold children in detention centers."** The arrival of Trump for the protesters is an opportunity to hear different opinions, to show the will to do politics differently."*



ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

EU efforts are not motivated by humanitarianism...

*"The **EU parliament** comes with propaganda video: 'Refugees are the salvation of Europe!'"*

"A new reason for migration on the horizon: climate change. Big waves of migration are expected due to extreme weather conditions"

*#NGO ships - The **#Spanish #OpenArms** is luring back **ILLEGAL MIGRANTS** just outside the **Libyan territorial waters**. As long as these ships are not docked, saying "lure" or "collaboration with smuggling" is a no-brainer.*

PRO-MIGRANT VOICES

While humanitarian efforts are welcome...

Migrant center "La Porte d'Ulysse" has opened its doors in Haren

The City of Brussels will open a reception center for migrants on Monday

*Let's implement a **humanitarian visa at European level rather than leaving migrants in the hands of smugglers.** (...)*

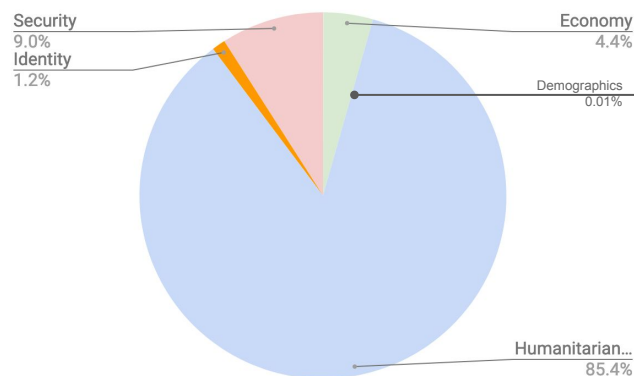
Flanders grants 200,000 euros in emergency aid to Rohingya refugees in #Bangladesh

Pan-European Narratives | BE

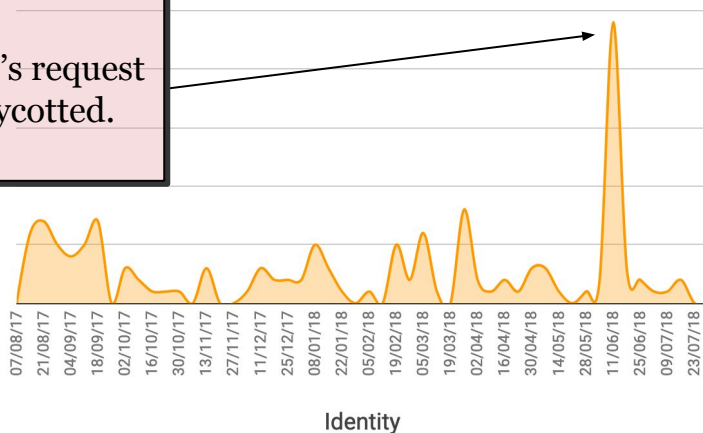
Identity and Customs (1)

While the discussion of identity is almost nonexistent in Wallonia, it appears in almost half of the Flemish conversations. Migration is viewed through the lense of Flemish autonomy and independence, in which Islam (and its perceived intolerance) is recognized as a threat to Flemish and European values. The two spikes in the conversation reflect the different attitudes clearly - one of solidarity, and one of standing up to a perceived threat.

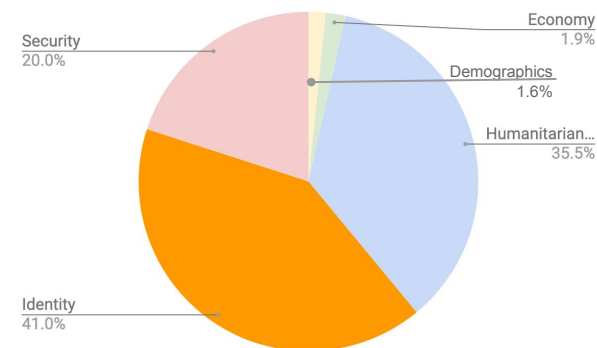
French Results:
~2,200



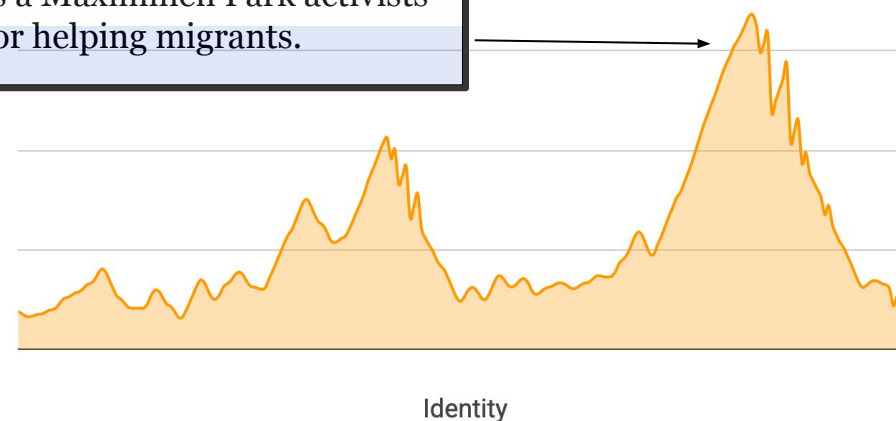
Muslim French singer Médine's request to perform in Bataclan is boycotted.



Dutch Results:
~77,000



Flemish people support Francken as he imprisons a Maximilien Park activists for helping migrants.



ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

Supporters of multiculturalism are hypocrites

*It should be noted that these are the kind of people who always argue that more diversity and more migrants are needed. And **then they are complaining about a mixed culture, the result of the ethnic mix that they themselves advocate.***

Islamisation of Belgium is a real threat

*The system praises the merits of migrants. But **large-scale immigration** provides no opportunity for assimilation—instead, it **provokes a territorial and cultural conflict and leads to the Islamization of the country.** It's a chance for immigrants, but a disaster for our civilization.*

Europe's identity must be defended against migration

*When are the GREENs going to understand, and see that **80% of people are fed up with migration tolerance.** Because social media is all over it. Do you want a GREEN environment? First do something about the people of Africa!*

*Francken: "**If Europe can not solve the problem of migration, there is no EU within five years more**"*

*Notice how it disappeared from the #media recently the concept #refugees and in its place the #illegal #immigrants, #migrantes they are called? **As If WE asked for their arrival!** #replacement #Soros*

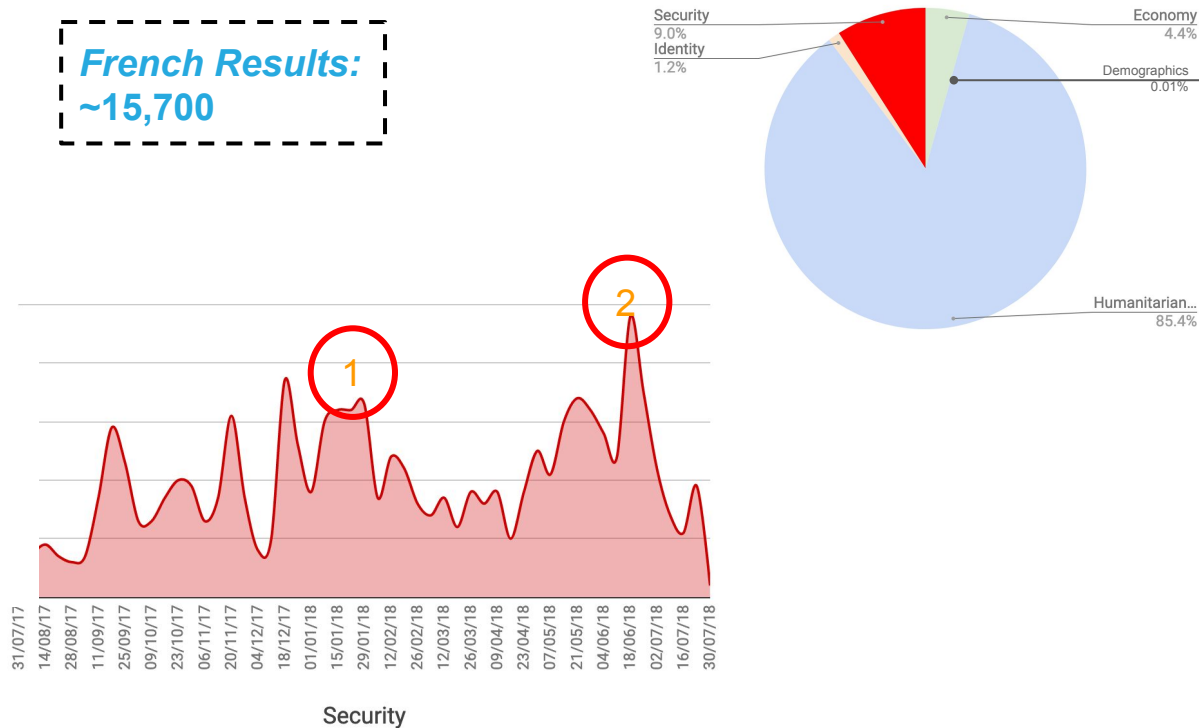
Pan-European Narratives | BE

Security (1)

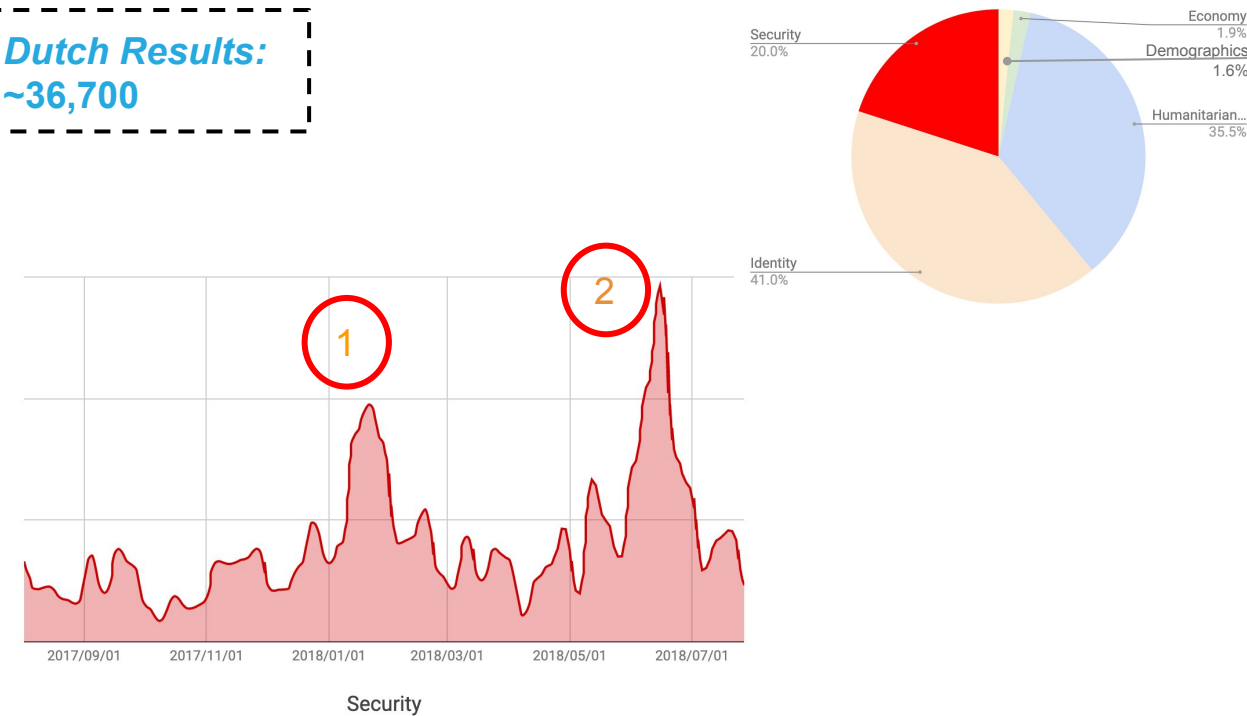
The same stories of international migration-related controversies were driving the discussion, but the interpretation was strikingly different between the two regions. Often, the very same story was discussed from an anti-migrant security stance by Flemish, and from a pro-migrant humanitarian stance by Wallons.

In both conversations, the **first peak** was about the deportation of Sudanese migrants, and the **second peak** was ignited by Trump's controversial policies that served as a lense with which to view the European refugee and migration centres. The conversation on security issues in both languages is exclusively anti-migration.

French Results:
~15,700



Dutch Results:
~36,700





ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

Migrants as a threat to the population

*Valenciennes: **After sexually assaulting four girls** (one of them 15 years old), **the Afghan refugee can leave freely.***

Opening the borders to migrants means a security threat for locals

*The mayor of Antwerp warns the "leftists": **"Opening the borders to the migrants will endanger local security"***

Migrants do not respect the law

***Migrants at Park Maximilien: some police want to intervene** to stop migrants in the area of the Gare du Nord*

*Altercation between migrants and police in a highway parking lot near Grand-Bigard: **"One of our men had to fire a warning shot"***

Concerns over migrants heading to the UK camping in Belgium

*Theo Francken: **"NO Calais in our capital!"***

Local security vs. humanitarian issues come up in case of convicted terrorist

***"The Council is not sure that returned Moroccans will not be tortured upon arrival in their country.** Interior Minister Jan Jambon and Theo Francken leave tomorrow to Morocco to discuss it"*

There are calls for more policing measures

"This afternoon we have removed 150 illegal immigrants from a park in Brussels. (...) Tough talk alone and throwing individual files in the media is not a serious solution!"

+ *Local Issues in Belgium Around Migration*



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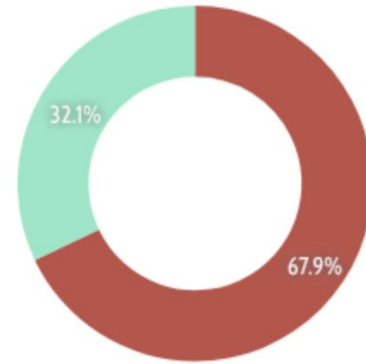
Local Issues | BE

Flemish Independence and Theo Francken

While the divide is great between these regions, **Theo Francken, Secretary of State for Asylum, Migration and Administrative Simplification** is a key figure in both the Flemish and the Wallon conversation around migration.

His rhetoric and actions cut through the heart of the discourse in Belgium—causing polarization between the two regions, with the Flemish overwhelmingly in favour of him along the lines of **security and identity**, and the Wallonians opposed to him on **humanitarian** grounds.

It is worth noting that Francken's party, the N-VA previously ran on the platform of **Flemish independence**, and Francken is able to use the migration issue to rally around their **national identity**.



Francken's incorrect statement on the number of Bangladeshis travelling on the Aquarius rescue ship triggers controversy



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.

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



3.

European and Domestic Politics Context within Narratives | BE

Impact of Politics on Migration Narratives

European Context

Security of a country depends on its' network of allies (in this case, specifically the EU).

The role of other European countries in the migrant crisis is discussed extensively. For example, certain countries may accuse others of **taking less of the migration burden**.

The **EU quota system** is mentioned as well, and the responsibility of the current migration crisis is often shifted to key European politicians such as Angela Merkel or Emmanuel Macron.

Domestic Politics Context

Domestic politicians taking stance on the migration issue and their strategies to cope with the threat posed by migration.

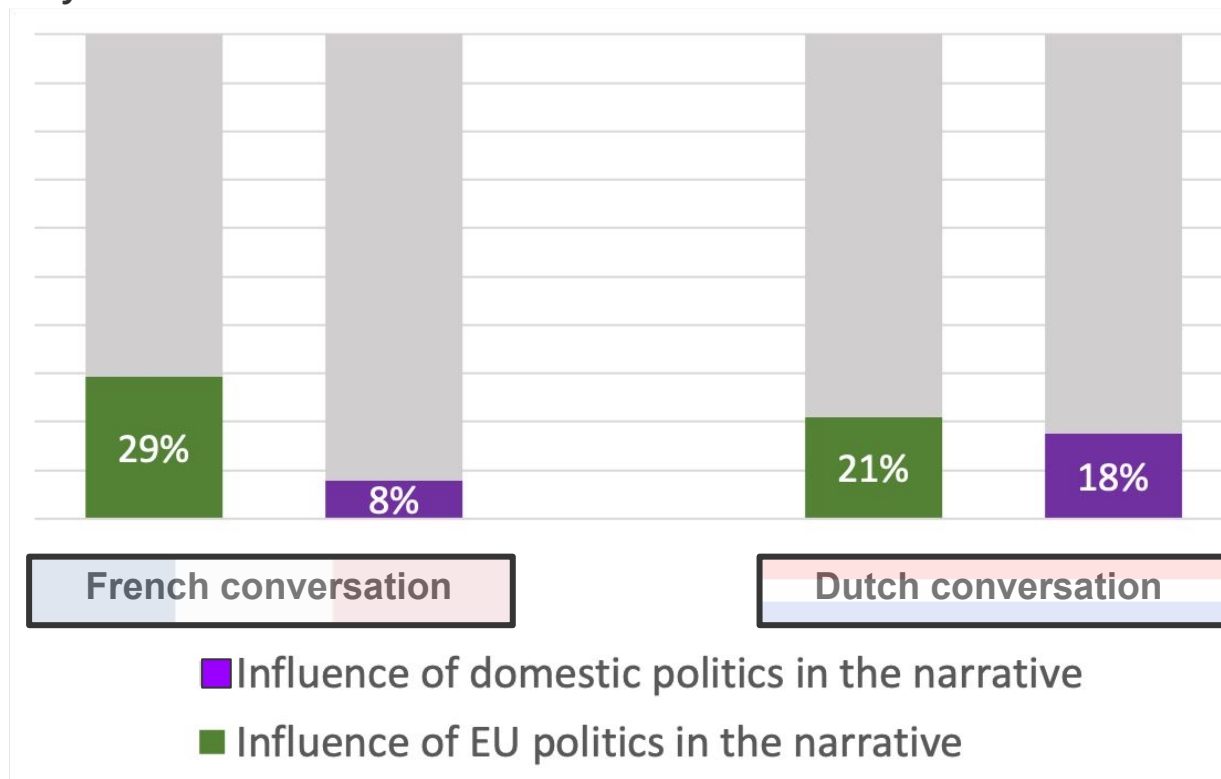
Discussions around **local parties and politicians** are prevalent on public social media platforms throughout all EU countries. It is clear that a local political party's position on migration strongly affects its popularity and election results.



European and Domestic Politics Context within Narratives | BE

The Migration Crisis is seen as an International Problem

Both Walloons and Flemish consider **the migration crisis to be more of an international issue than a domestic problem**, while the overall conversation is largely removed from politics. However, people of Flanders discuss migration in the context of Belgian politics significantly more often than French-speaking Walloons due to the popularity of Theo Francken.



+ *Discussion Tone in Belgium*

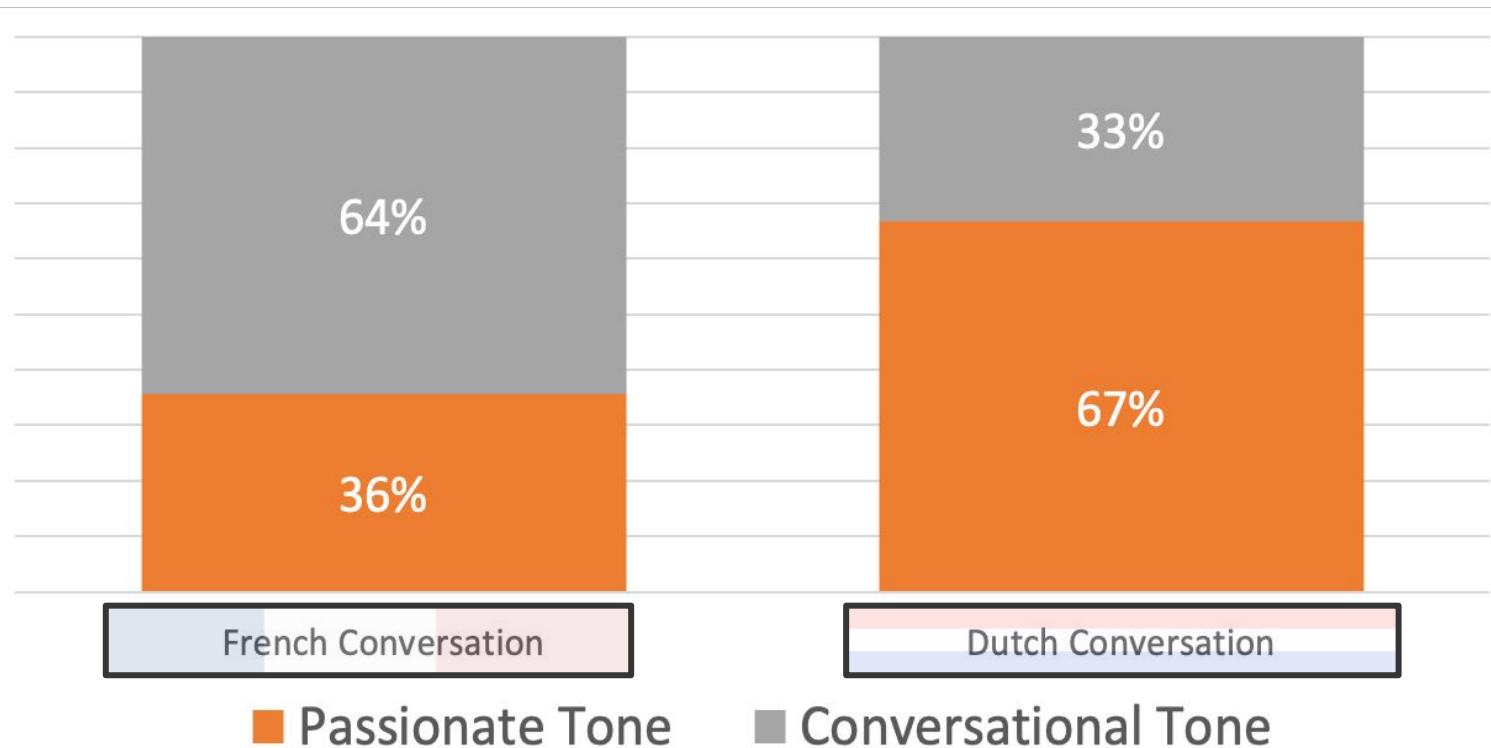


4.

Conversational Tone Throughout the Discussion

Discussion tone is another area which reflects the divide between the conversation of the Walloons (in French) and the Flemish (in Dutch).

While **Walloons** discuss migration in a **more reserved**, conversational manner, **Flemish** demonstrate **intense emotions** regarding the European migration crisis.



+ *Conversation Channels*



5.



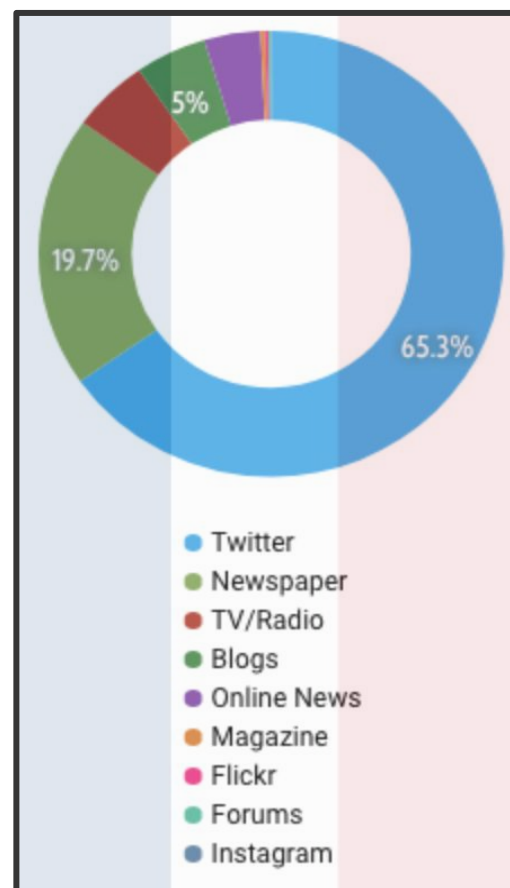
Channel Distribution | BE

From the Analysed and Publicly Available Data, Twitter Dominates the Debate

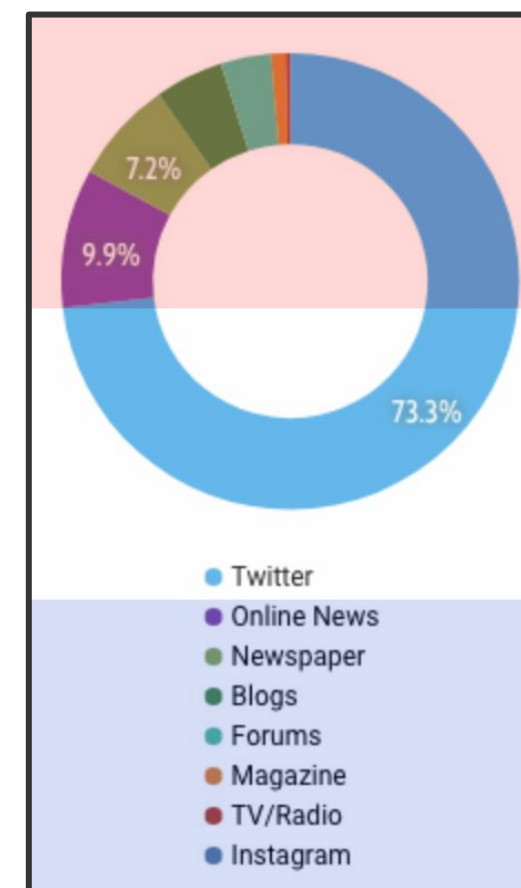
When it comes to addressing migration in the public online sphere, Belgians most often use **Twitter** to share their views. This platform captures more than 60% of conversations in both languages.

The remaining discussion takes place on online news sites, blogs, and forums.

Overall Conversation in French : ~172,800



Overall Conversation in Dutch : ~187,500



Most Influential Authors | BE

Journalists' Posts Trigger The Highest Engagement

The conversation is driven in the two regions by established news websites, with a notable contribution on the Flemish side from certain right-wing accounts with significant reach.

Conversation drivers: Flanders	Description
vrt.be	Dutch television
standaard.be	Dutch news site
hln.be	Dutch news site
nieuws.be	Dutch news site
@SamvanRooy1	Flemish nationalist politician
@VluchtwerkVI	Refugee aid org
@6NOD3SI	Right wing twitter troll
forum.politics.be	Politics forum (dutch)

Conversation drivers: Wallonia	Description
lalibre.be	French news site
rtl.be	French television
rtbf.be	French news site
lesoir.be	French news site
Emmanuel Foulon (@efoulon1)	EP press officer