

Migration Narratives in Europe

A Social Media Intelligence Study

Country report for the Republic of Croatia



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

- 2019 -



Context to the Croatian Discussion on Migration

- Croatia has been a member of the European Union since 2013, with a population of 4,225,316 in 2015. At its peak, official **asylum seekers in the country made up 0.01% of the population**.^{*} Although the total number is low, the large number of migrants crossing Croatia made the topic decisive in the 2016 elections.
- Public social media conversation in Croatia around migration in the measured year consists of ~80,400 posts. Compared to population size, **the conversation on migration in Croatia is the 20th largest in the EU**.
- While initially humanitarian and welcoming in their official policies based on their own experiences with war, the **Croatian immigration and asylum laws and the official approach to the question quickly shifted in early 2016 towards hostility**, and this rift is apparent in the social media conversations as well.
- The governing party since 2016 is HDZ, a **centre-right conservative** formation.



^{*}Source: europarl.europa.eu



Introduction | HR

Migration discourse in Croatia - a change in the wind

Prior to the winter of 2015-2016, Croatia had a humanitarian migration policy with overwhelming support, based on the country's experience with the Yugoslav war as many had been refugees and migrants themselves. However, as the elections came up, the right-conservative HDZ party managed to win the election, first receiving support from Viktor Orbán by securitizing the migration discourse.

In light of these events, we can see that almost exclusively the two narratives around the country are **security** and **humanitarianism**, dealing with the rift in public attitudes as well as official policies – from that of a welcoming one to one that is actively hostile to migration.



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 | HR

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

Size of Pan-European Narratives

Security and **humanitarianism** together dominate the Croatian discourse, with every other narrative falling far behind as the country shifts attitudes about migration.

Local Issues

The **Yugoslav War** is the backdrop of the migration discourse, coming up not only in humanitarianism to reflect on the country's own past, but also through far-right figures re-emerging and reframing the past, riding the wave of immigration.

EU & Domestic Politics

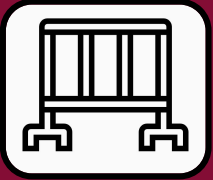
Interestingly, **EU politics are discussed far more than Croatian ones**, indicating that the narratives around migration, due to the low number of asylum seekers, are predominantly shaped through news and events abroad.

Conversation Channels

The discourse takes place predominantly through **news sites, twitter and blogs**, with the war of narratives playing out and emerging in number of unique authors per narrative, as a sign of shaping public perception.



Pan-European Narratives in the Croatian Context



The security narrative was dominant, as refugees and migrants are reframed to be threats to national security and welfare to ramp up paranoia and justify hostile policing actions on the border.



Humanitarianism was the second biggest narrative, echoing empathetic sentiments based on the shared experience of fleeing from war and emphasizing the diversity of Croatians – especially famous ones, which came plenty during the World Cup.



The identity discourse, while tiny, predominantly is a tool to emphasize the difference between the civilized Europeans and the alien migrants, who are seen as a threat to national identity.



The demographic narrative was small, and it tethered between the local problems of increasing emigration for better work opportunities and the acceptability of migrants for work.



The economic discourse was tiny, but it echoed sentiments of prioritizing the needs of the local poor over the needs of migrants or asylum seekers.

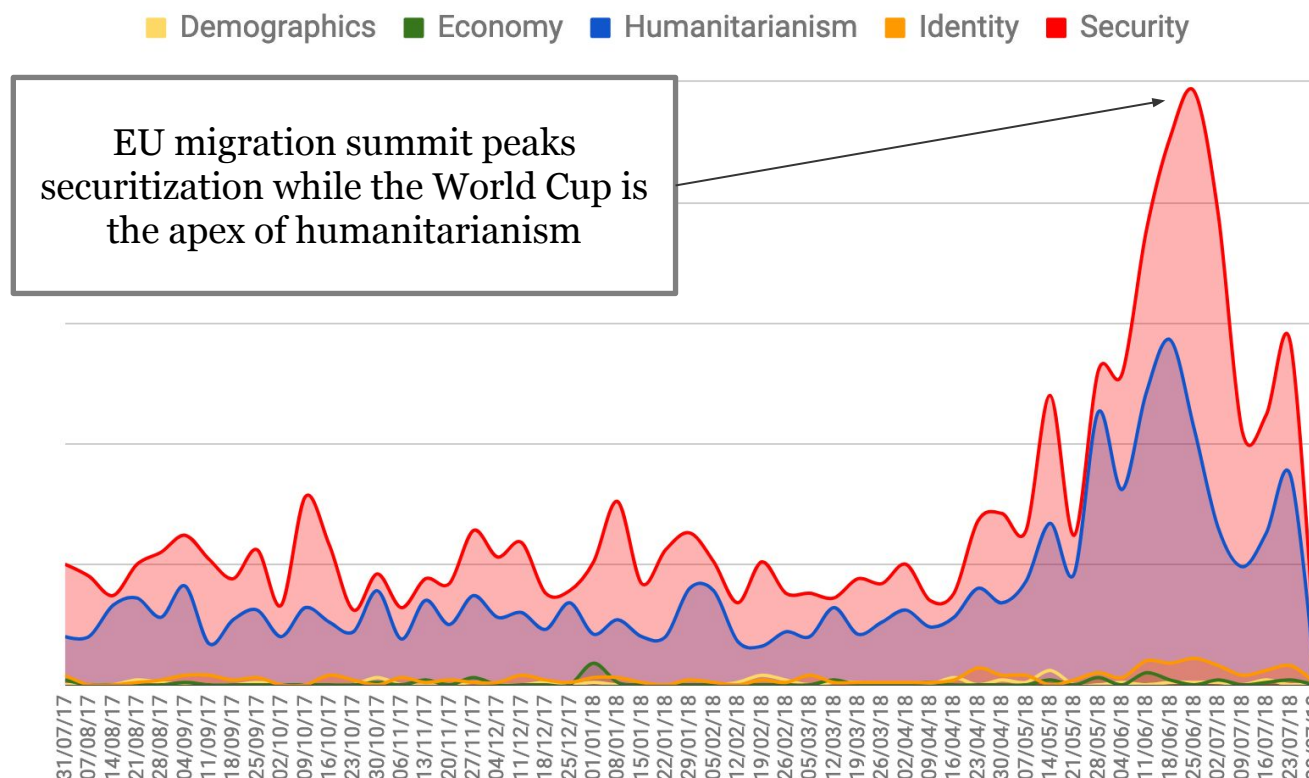
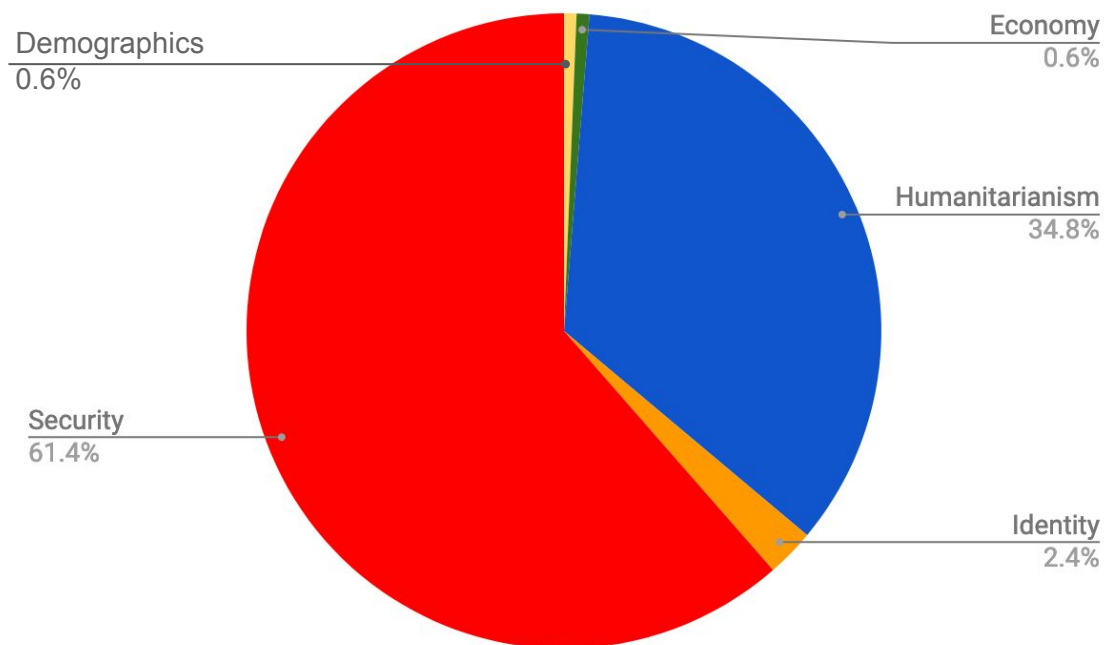
+ *Pan-European Narratives in Croatia*

1.

The shape of the migration discourse

Like almost everywhere, security and humanitarianism go hand in hand, and peak around the EU migration summit in June 2018. The added twist in Croatia is that this was around the same time as the Football World Cup, where many immigrant footballers participated. Croatia made it to the finals, and due to the prolonged exposure, humanitarian issues regarding immigrant athletes attracted significant attention. However, the continued securitization of the discourse was far more numerous.

Results:
~84K





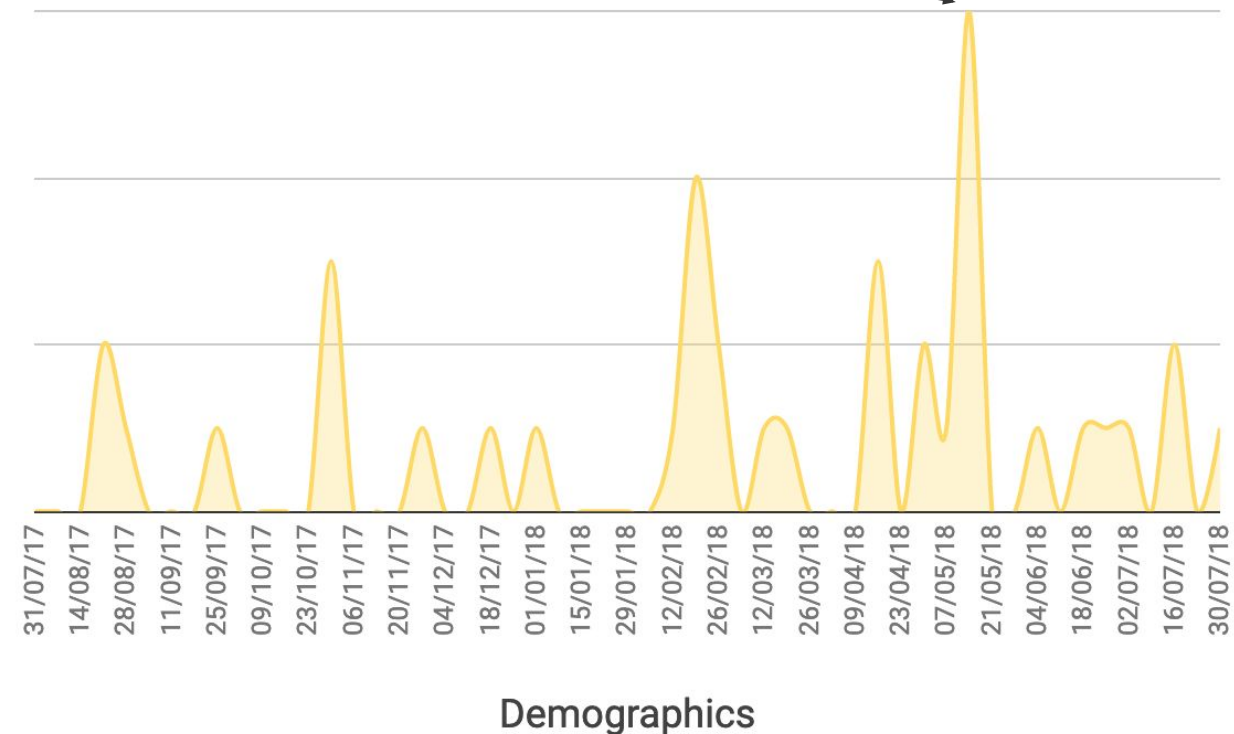
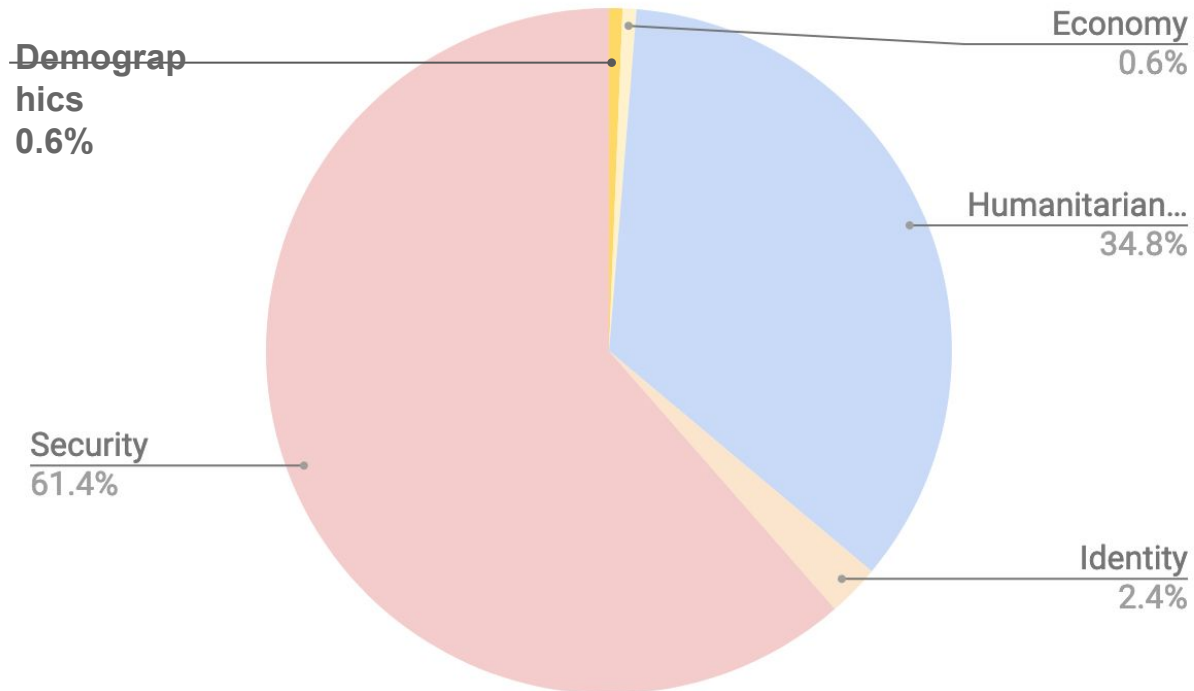
Pan-European Narratives | HR

Demographics (1)

The demographic discourse in Croatia was small, and chiefly concerned with the depopulation of the local areas due to economic migration, which was weighed against the option of integrating immigrants who come to work.

Results:
~500

Problem with growing depopulation of Bosnia, young people are leaving, refugees (Homeland war) have difficulties returning



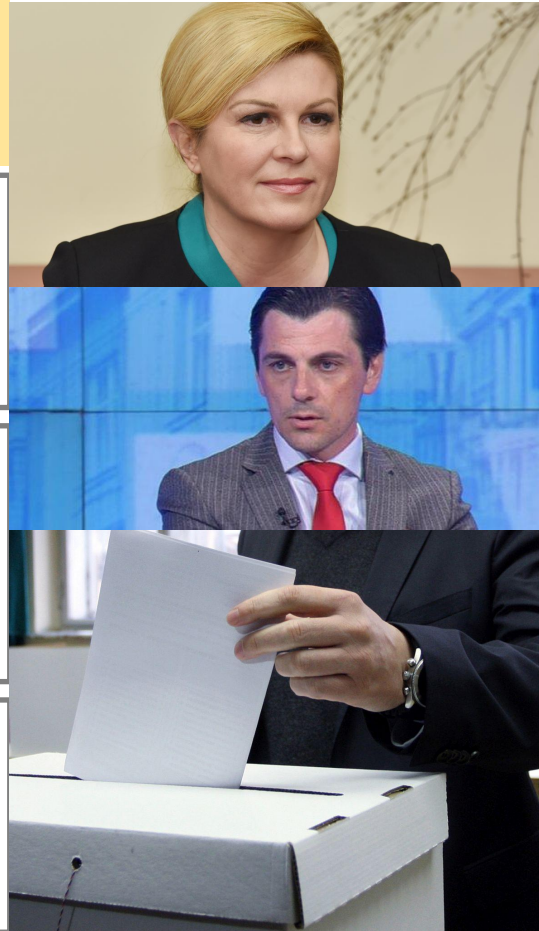
Pan-European Narratives | HR Demographics (2)

Demographic discourse is largely technical regarding migration

“Working migrants are leaving the Adriatic and go to Austria and Germany”

“Demographic picture of Europe is changed by immigrants”

“Young people are leaving, but there are migrants who come and want to work”



Images in the discussion around demographics were portraying a conversation mainly about statistics, with economical proposals regarding migration in general in the area, which is sympathetic to the idea of solving the problem with accepting immigrants.

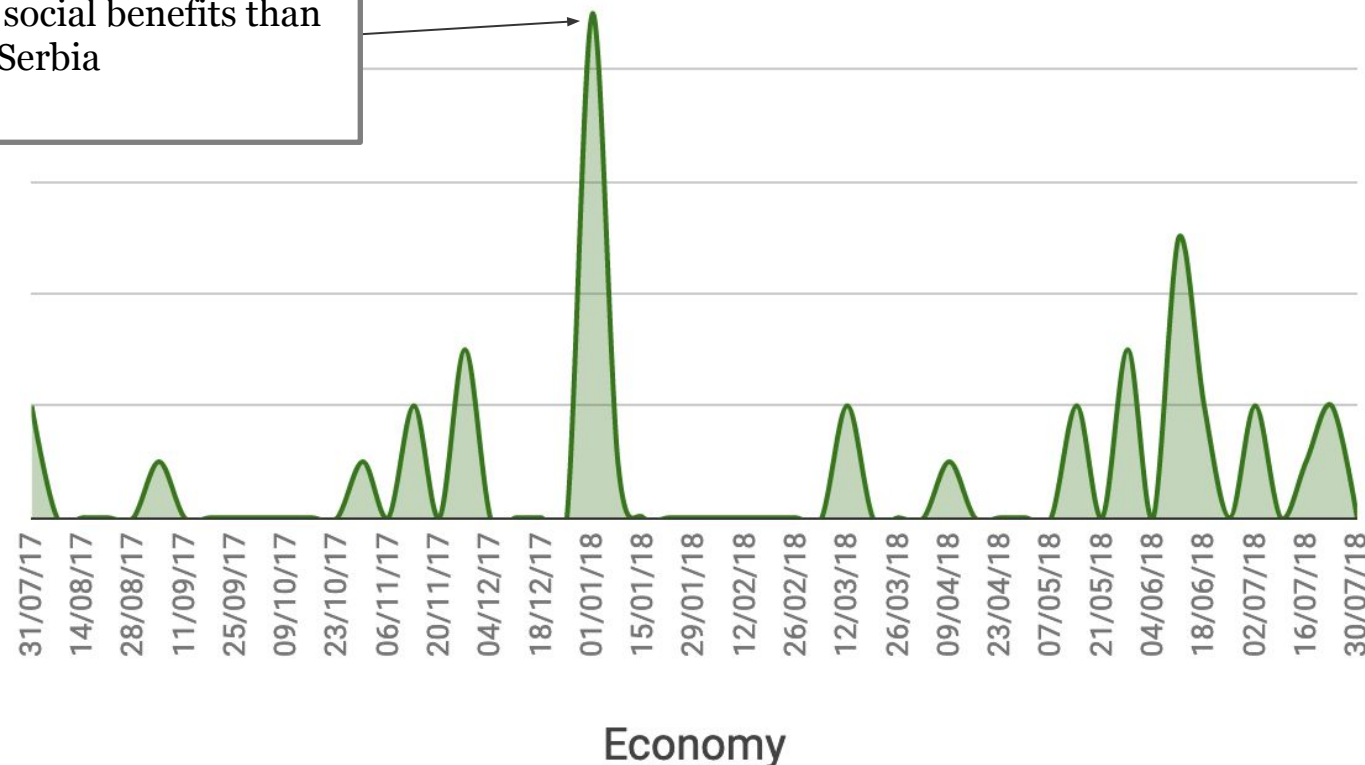
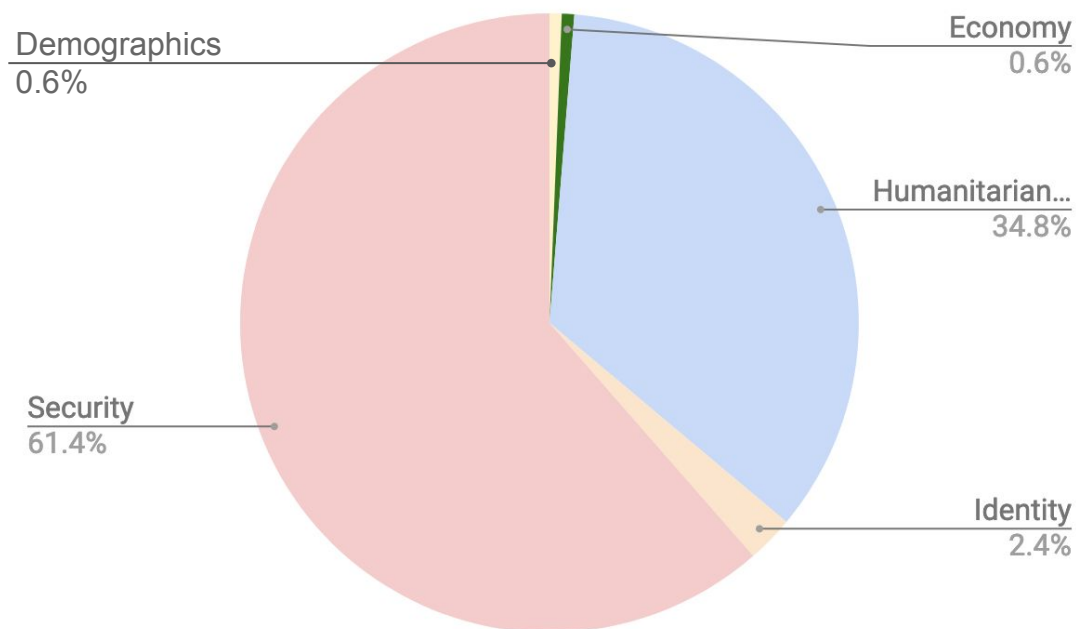
Pan-European Narratives | HR

Economy (1)

The economic discourse was the tiniest, and was mostly concerned with the relative poverty of the area. EU-related policies were perceived to help migrants rather than the indigenous local population, and was criticized for being hypocritical. This environment elevated key political figures (such as Viktor Orbán) in Croatia and elsewhere in Europe who echoed this sentiment.

Results:
~500

Statistic: Migrants having bigger social benefits than poor population of Serbia



Pan-European Narratives | HR Economy (2)

ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

Economic relief to migration is framed as unfair

“Adopt the LAW - as long as there are poor Serb children in Serbia, no dinar from the budget can go to lgbt fathers, migrants, or non-governmental bodies.”

“Germany offers 3,000 euros for migrants to return home!”

“Orban thinks migrants should not be given a single cent”



The economic narrative is mostly about the perceived unfairness of aid given to migrants, asylum seekers, or those who help them, and is used mostly to criticize EU politicians or to praise others.

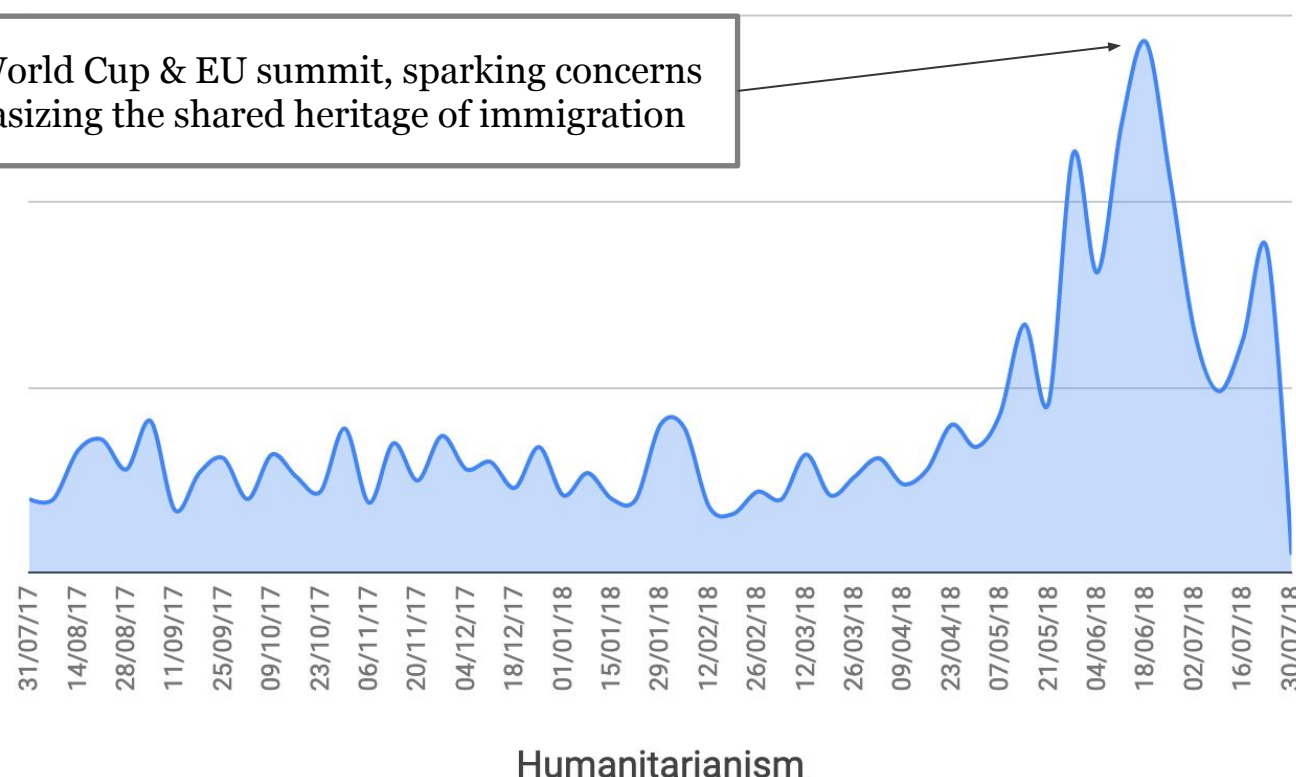
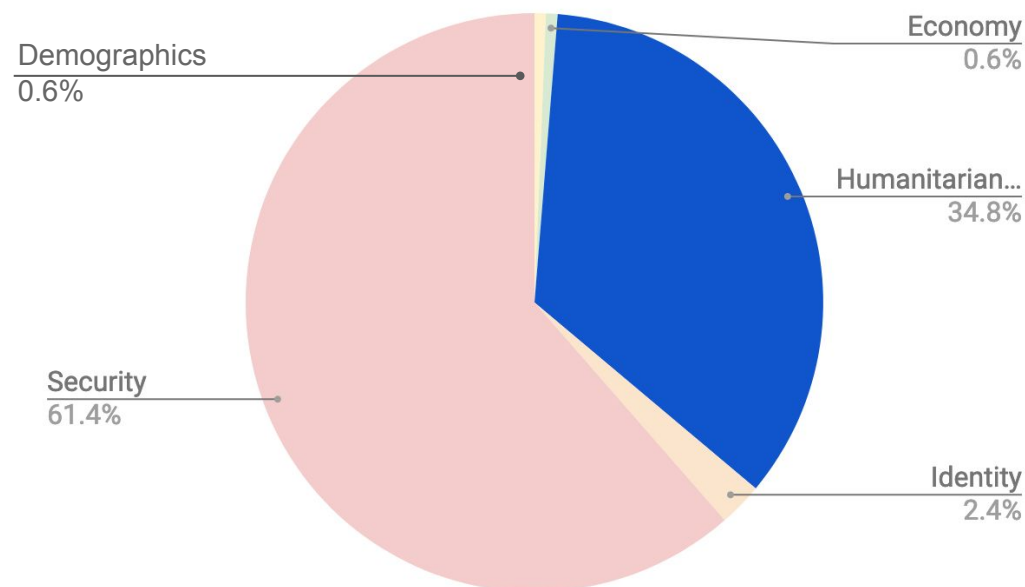
Pan-European Narratives | HR

Humanitarianism (1)

Humanitarianism rested on a shared empathy for refugees backed up by Croatians' own experience of war and the history of Croatian migration. As the Football World Cup followed, the immigrant background of certain footballers was emphasized, and by the EU summit, concerns were raised of the increasingly brutal treatment of migrants at the Serbian-Bosnian borders, where migrants were shot at. The Pope's calls for solidarity were also heard by the Jesuits, who started crowdfunding to care for refugees and migrants.

Results:
~28K

Humanitarianism peaked at the World Cup & EU summit, sparking concerns over border shootings and emphasizing the shared heritage of immigration



Pan-European Narratives | HR Humanitarianism (2)

PRO-MIGRANT VOICES

Humanitarianism calls for paying help forward, while being worried about the regional developments

If refugees come, we need to treat them the way we wanted to be treated when we were refugees. Nothing more and nothing less than that. Croatia, remember.

As much as the pre-election videos that we spotted on YouTube have been hacked by us, they are nothing compared to the pre-election videos that pop up on YouTube in Hungary, where the entire scene scares people with migrants shouting "Allahu Akbar".

Help the Croatian society not to remain heartbroken to the needs of refugees. Helping us when it was needed, let us help now and always to others in need.



Humanitarianism was invoked in the case of soccer player Luka Modrić, himself a refugee, and tied to Croatian economic migrants or war refugees in images.

In addition, humanitarian anxieties were raised and discussed in reference to Hungary, and the successful importing of Orban Viktor's politics to Croatia.



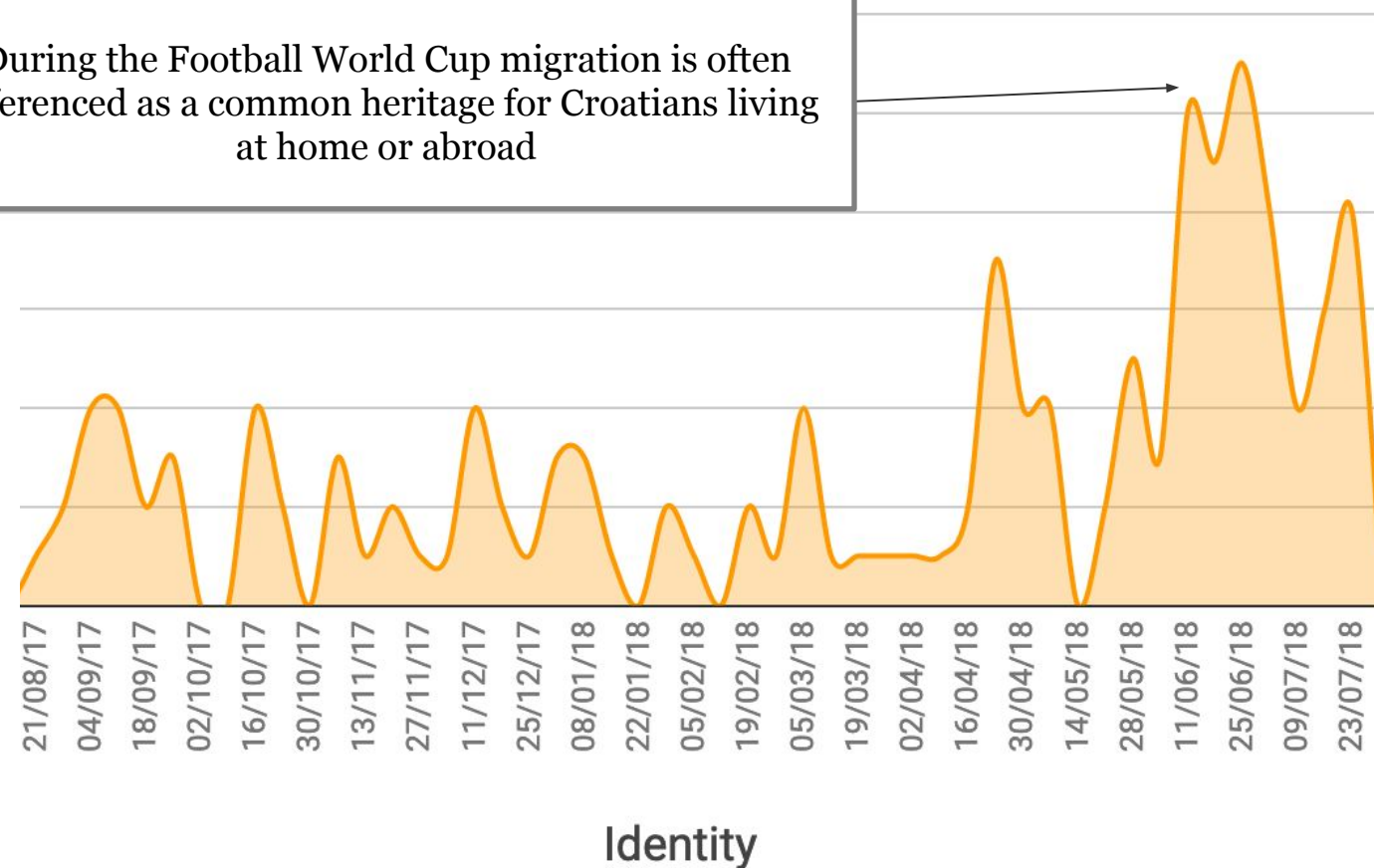
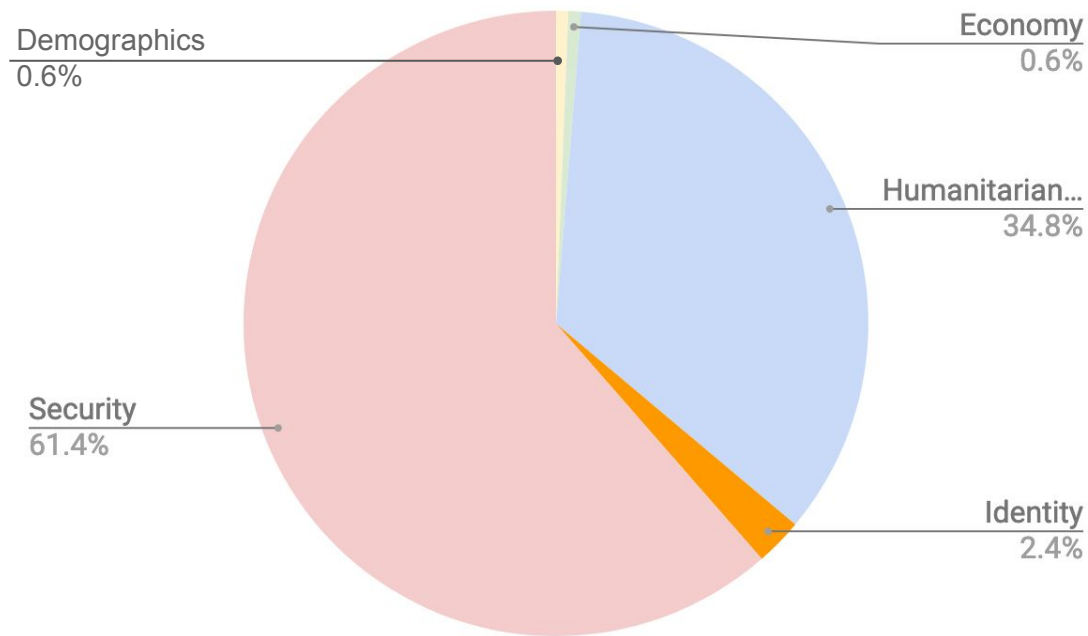
Pan-European Narratives | HR

Identity & Customs (1)

The identity narrative was torn between two sides: one sympathetic to refugees on the basis of shared past with migration, and one that was increasingly hostile to it, based on a national and European identity that is not compatible with Muslim culture. By the size of it, it was a minor conversation next to its bigger counterparts in Security and Humanitarianism.

Results:
~2K

During the Football World Cup migration is often referenced as a common heritage for Croatians living at home or abroad



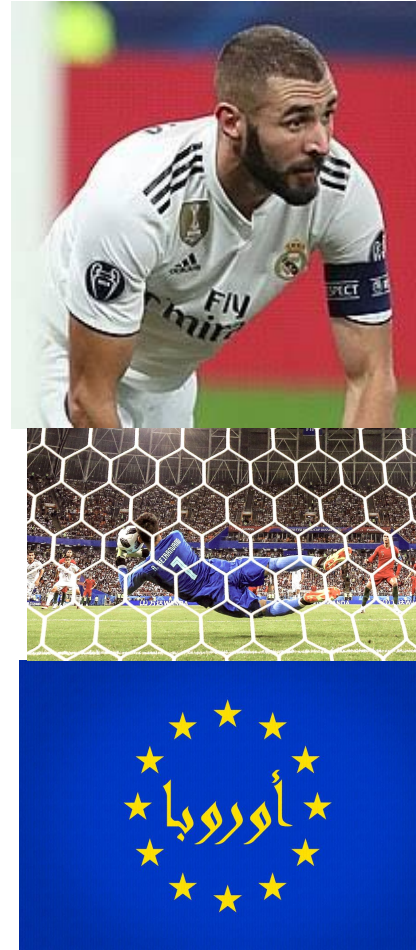
Pan-European Narratives | HR Identity & Customs (2)

Identity splits expressed in politics, religion, and soccer

“We (Istrian Democratic party) did not want to accept migrants and refugees into empty hotels, because they feared they would change the national composition of the population”

In order to better integrate refugees into the Croatian society, the Croatian Catholic University and Jesuite refugee organisation have come together for exchange of experiences

“Karim Benzema: When I score, then I am a Frenchman, when I miss, I’m Arabic.”



The identity narratives were split in different subjects around soccer, religion, and heritage. Comments reflect the concern that ‘if we are all immigrants, how come we do not tolerate immigration’? When does one pass the threshold of acceptance? Is Christianity welcoming or self-preserving? And if the EU is Christian in heritage, then which identity does it have?

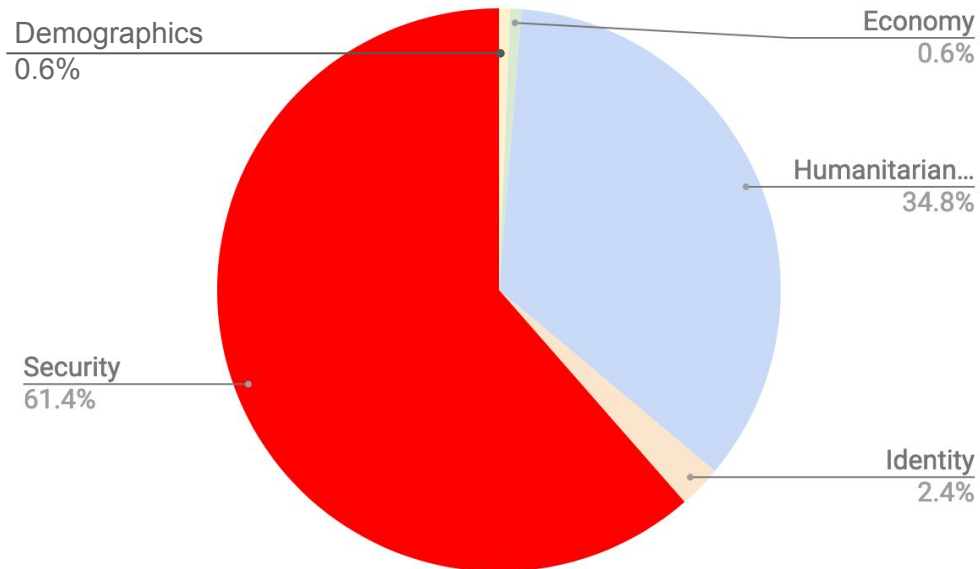


Pan-European Narratives | HR

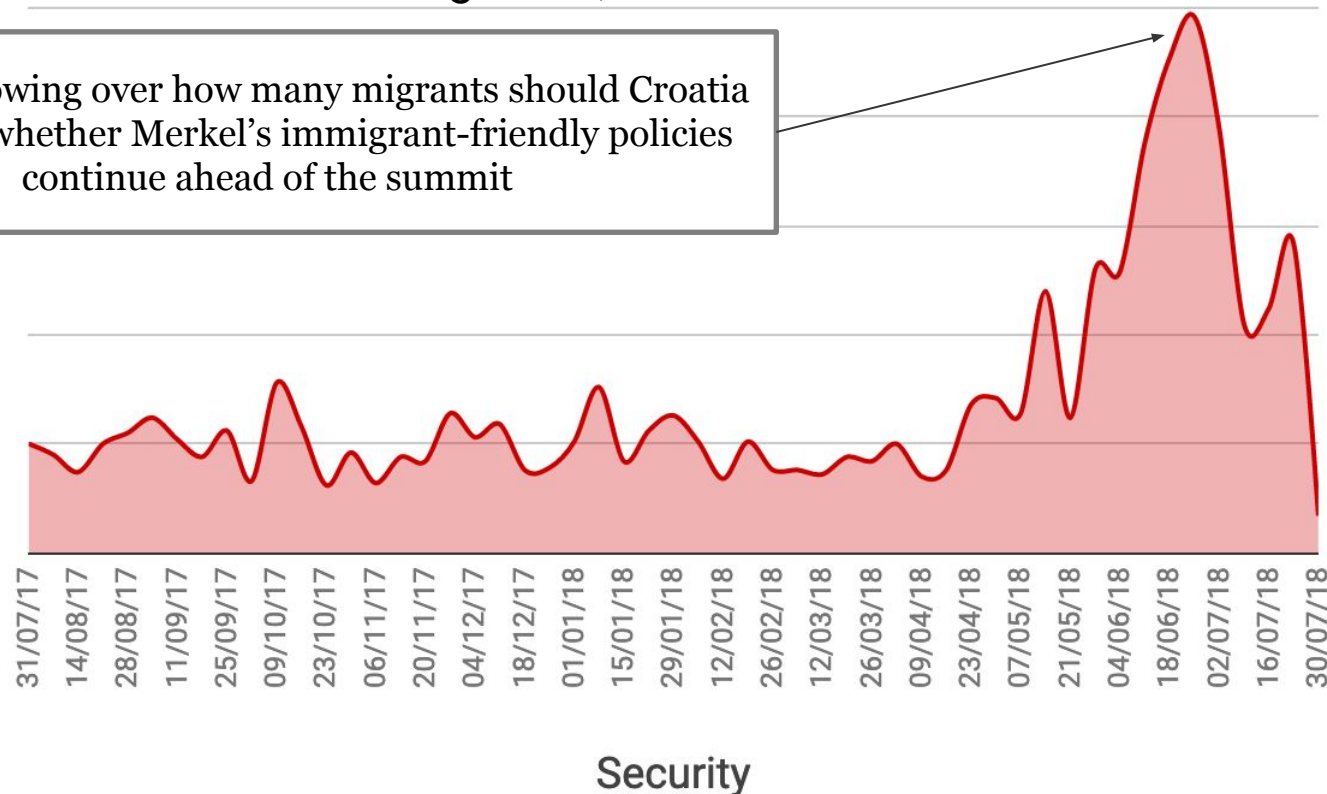
Security (1)

Security was the dominant discourse, following international news and incidents at the border, framing migration as a threat to national and EU security. This is similar to Bulgaria and Hungary, where the daily news cycle includes plenty of crimes committed by people with migrant backgrounds happening all over Europe. The discussion around security ramped up towards the EU migration summit, expressing a want of tighter border controls to protect the citizenry from the perceived threat of immigration, in some cases with increased brutalization at the borders.

Results:
~49,5K



Concerns growing over how many migrants should Croatia accept and whether Merkel's immigrant-friendly policies continue ahead of the summit



Pan-European Narratives | HR Security (2)

ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

The security discourse follows the line of
“Fortress Europe”

“Police sweeps migrant camps searching for weapons”

“It is a tragic event, I express my regret for wounding children, but at the same time I stand behind all the police officers and officials who, at this moment, 24 hours a day, protect the Croatian border and prevent illegal migration in accordance with HR and EU laws”

“The aim of overthrowing Fico in Slovakia and the demonstration against Zeman in the Czech Republic is to bring those who would open the gates of these two countries to the migrants.”



The security discourse increasingly presented migrants as a threat and politicians as strongmen who protect the nation from the threat of migration, such as Viktor Orbán or the Croatian PM Andrej Plenković.

+ *Local Issues in Croatia Around Migration*



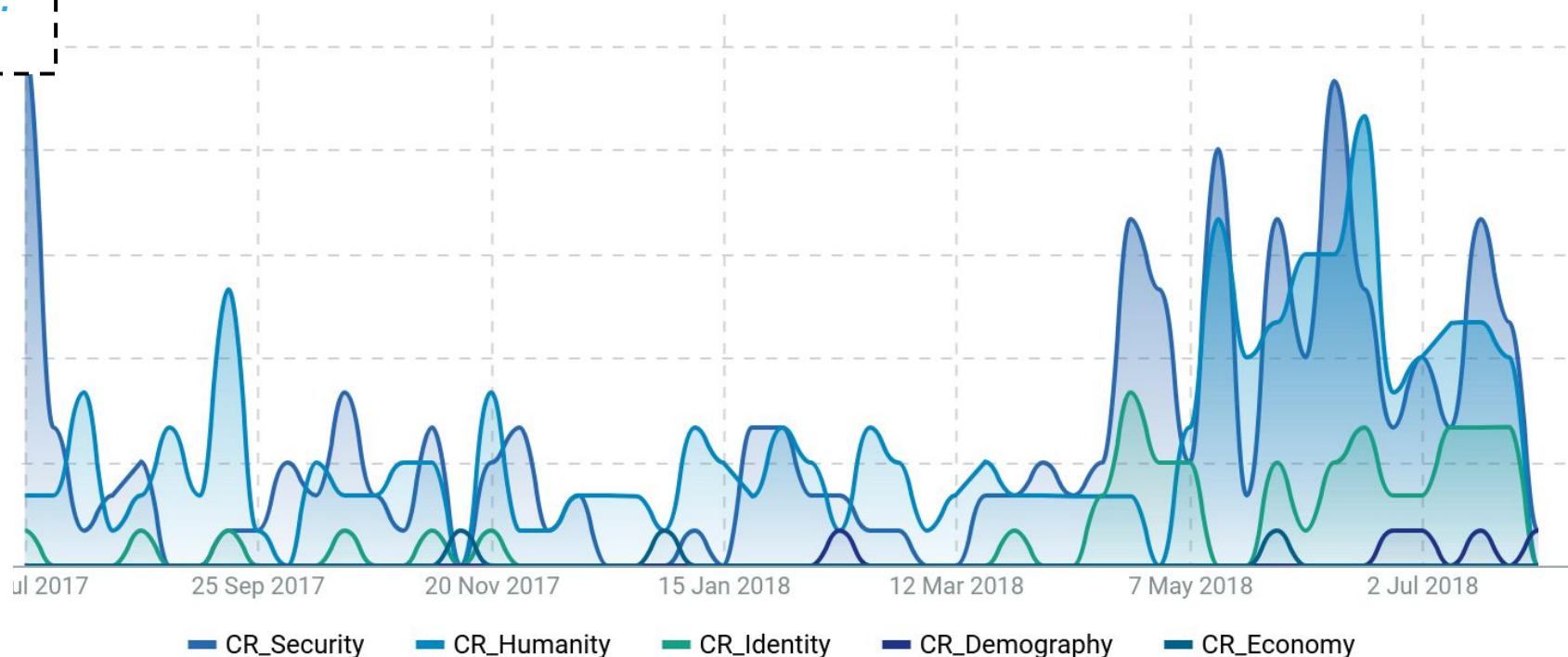
2.

Local Narratives | HR

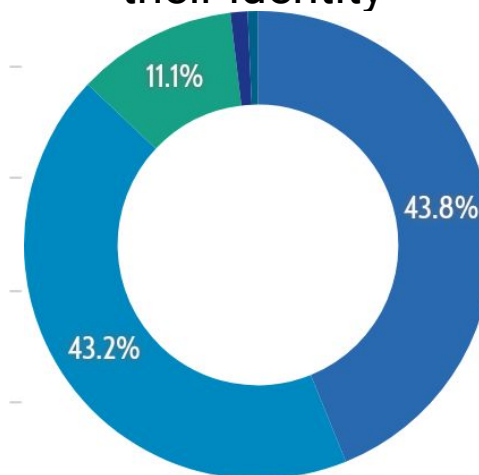
The Yugoslav War

The Yugoslav War was referenced both explicitly and implicitly, as a way to invoke sympathy towards refugees and migrants. However, with the rise of the right, nationalists are increasingly using the war within the frame of security, positioning the migration question as that of national defence.

Results:
~5k



The composition of the war is tied between security and humanitarianism, and opposing camps tie it to their identity



● CR_Security
● CR_Humanity
● CR_Identity
● CR_Demography
● CR_Economy

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



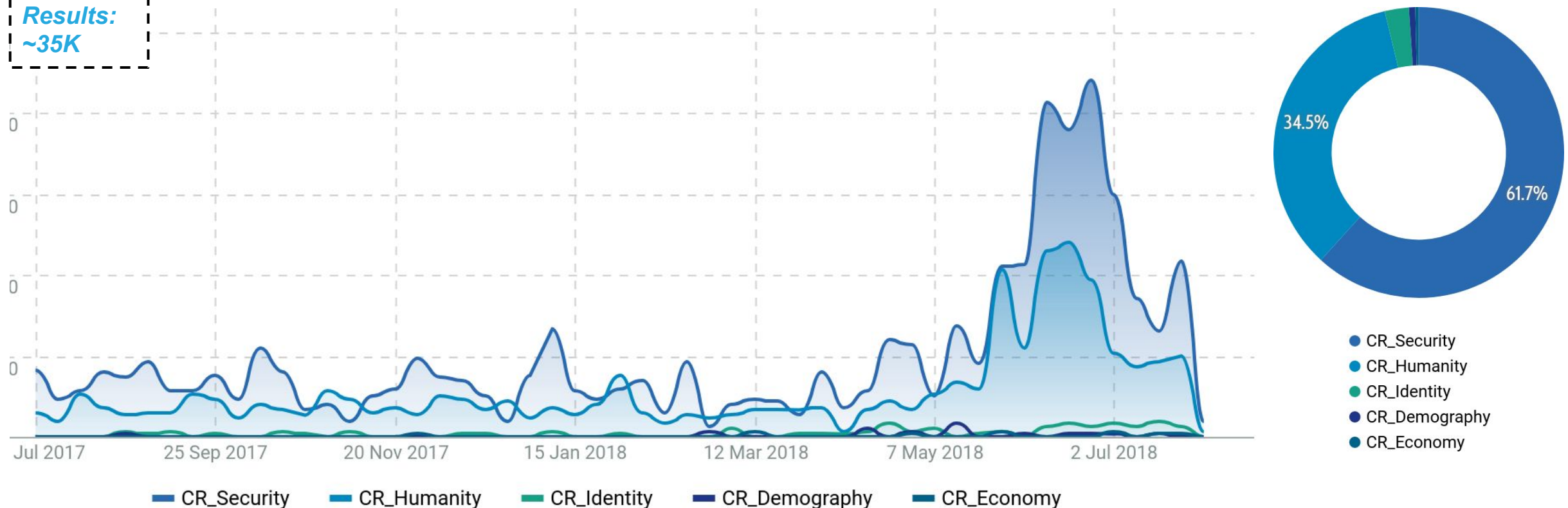
3.



European and Domestic Politics Context within Narratives | HR Migration: A tool in EU political campaigns

EU politics was mentioned over 44% in the conversation and closely followed the general trend in the discourse, with more emphasis on security. This shows that the migration subject is firmly rooted in EU political campaigning, and the securitization of the national discourse goes hand in hand with the same in the wider European context.

Results:
~35K



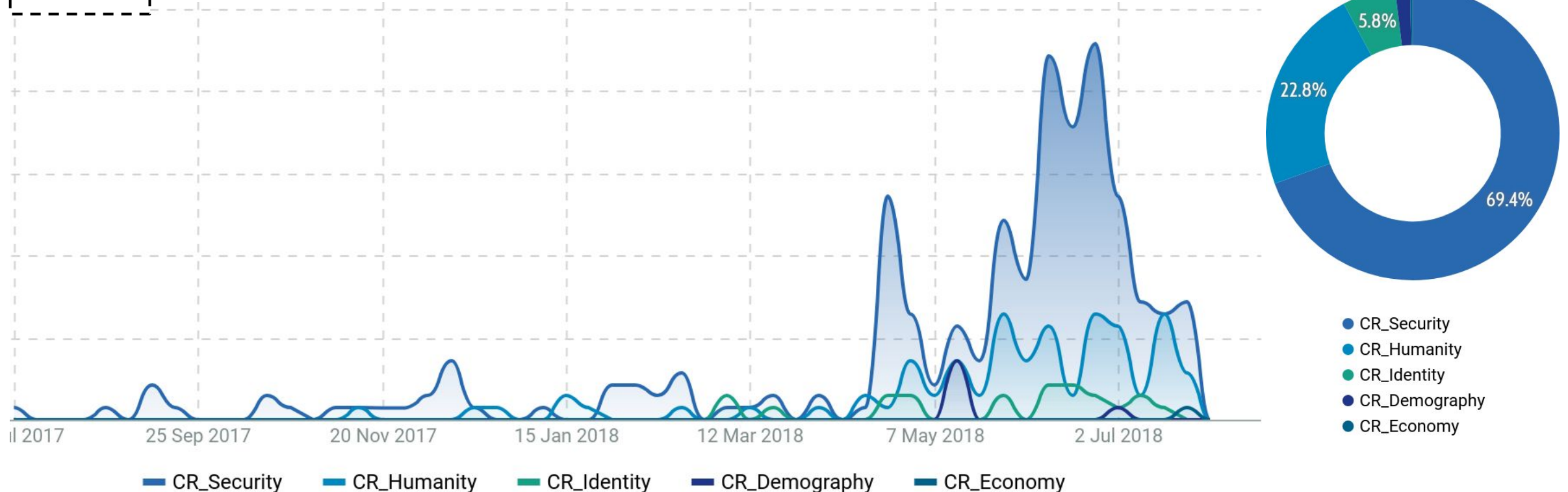


European and Domestic Politics Context within Narratives | HR

Migration: A tool in local political campaigns too

Local politics was a lower factor during the measured time, except for the nearing of the EU summit, where politicians calling for a tougher stance on immigration were able to ride the wave of the security narrative, as sort of campaigning tool.

Results:
~5k



+ *Conversation Channels*



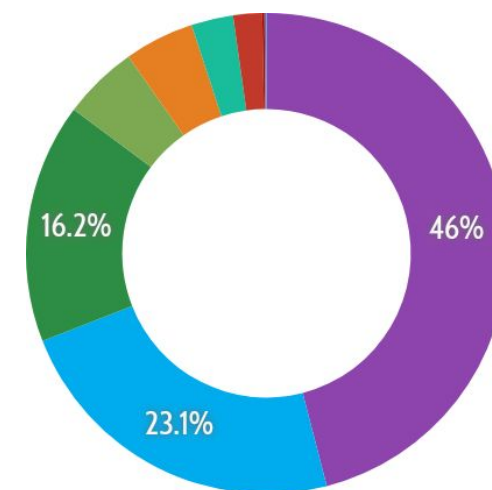
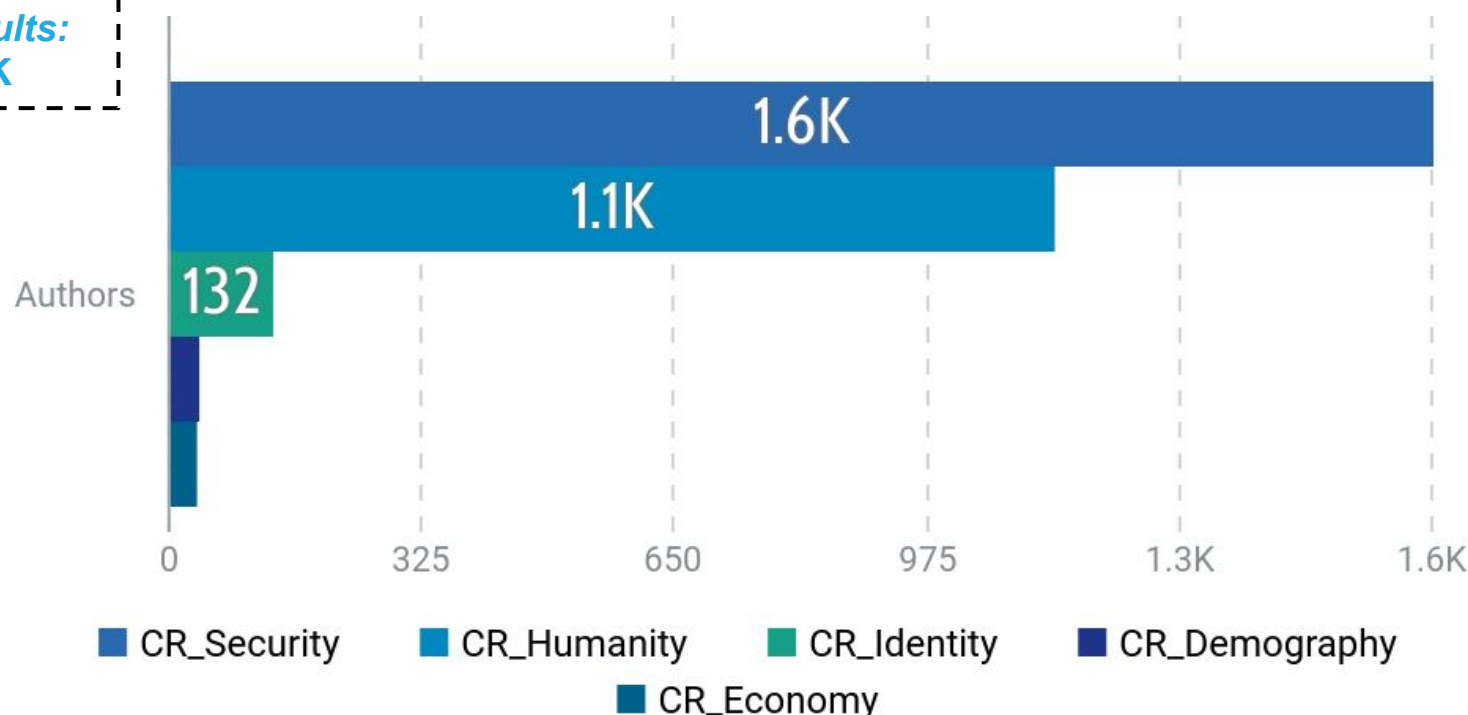
4.

Channel Distribution | HR

Pushing narratives on social media

The discourse was primarily run through online news, Twitter and blogs. However, when we look at the number of authors by narrative, we can see that the security conversation is being pushed by more voices than the humanitarian narrative, showcasing the strategy of influence in the age of social media.

Results:
~84K



- Online News
- Twitter
- Blogs
- Newspaper
- Magazine
- Forums
- TV/Radio
- YouTube