

# Migration Narratives in Europe

## *A Social Media Intelligence Study*

*Country report for Bulgaria*



A Bakamo Public  Project for the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

- 2019 -



# Context to the Bulgarian Discussion on Migration

- Bulgaria has been a member of the European Union since 2007, with a population of 7,202,198 in 2015. At its peak, official **asylum seekers in the country made up 0.23% of the population**.<sup>\*</sup> They are mostly contained in six refugee camps around the country.
- Public social media conversation in Bulgaria around migration in one year consists of ~96 252 posts. Compared to population size, **the conversation on migration in Bulgaria is the 14th largest in the EU**.
- The Bulgarian government is harshly against immigration and has advocated for closed outside borders of the Union during their EU presidency in 2018.
- Overall, based on the data the Bulgarians seem to be completely opposed to immigration, without a counter argument, but this might be influenced by the media environment.



<sup>\*</sup>Source: [europarl.europa.eu](http://europarl.europa.eu)

# Introduction | BG

Bulgaria is on the outer border of the European Union, and following the migration crisis in 2015 they erected a border fence to prevent further migration from Turkey. This would predestine them to have a strong security discourse, as they reelected Boyko Borisov for a third term in 2017 who installed the fence in the first place.

Bulgaria ranks 111 on the Press Freedom Index, which is the lowest score in the EU and online media drives a huge part of the conversation (~70%), we should note that most of these outlets are owned by government members or business men with good ties to the state. This means that the conversation in turn is one sided, echoing the government's viewpoints on migration issues and related narratives.

*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 | BG

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

### Size of Pan-European Narratives

Migration was primarily framed in **security** terms following official policies, while humanitarianism emerged mostly in relation to incidents abroad. In an Eastern-European fashion, demographic concerns was the third.

### Local Issues

The local discourse is heavily influenced by **Turkey** and the EU border. While in other Eastern countries we see other discourses pop up within migration, the lack of **press freedom** in the country itself warps the discourse.

### EU & Domestic Politics

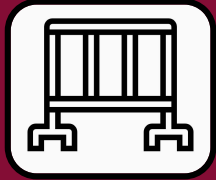
Bulgaria held the EU presidency in 2018, and they pushed for tougher border controls. Domestically Boyko Borisov leads the government for the third time, and is notably draconian in their handling of migration.

### Conversation Channels

The majority of the discussion was driven by media close to the government, showing how a lack of press freedom has a chilling effect on other parts of social media as well.



# Pan-European Narratives in the Bulgarian Context



Security is the main discourse in Bulgaria, focusing mainly on the policing of migrants, catching human traffickers and on crimes committed by migrants in other countries.



The humanitarian discourse was many times related to international issues, and mostly lacked mentions of the conditions in Bulgarian migrant camps.



The demographic issues were mostly related to emigration and poverty, as Bulgarian quality of life is affected by the lack of workers in key sectors - to which they don't consider third-world migrants as a solution.



The economic aspects of migration were discussed within the context of EU subsidies for accepting migrants, or rather striking a deal with Turkey to keep them from reaching the Bulgaria.



The identity questions were mostly discussed through talking about Viktor Orbán's success in the election, who is viewed as an ally and a bringer of a new age in European politics: one that defends Christian values.

# + *Pan-European Narratives in Bulgaria*



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1.



# The shape of the migration discourse

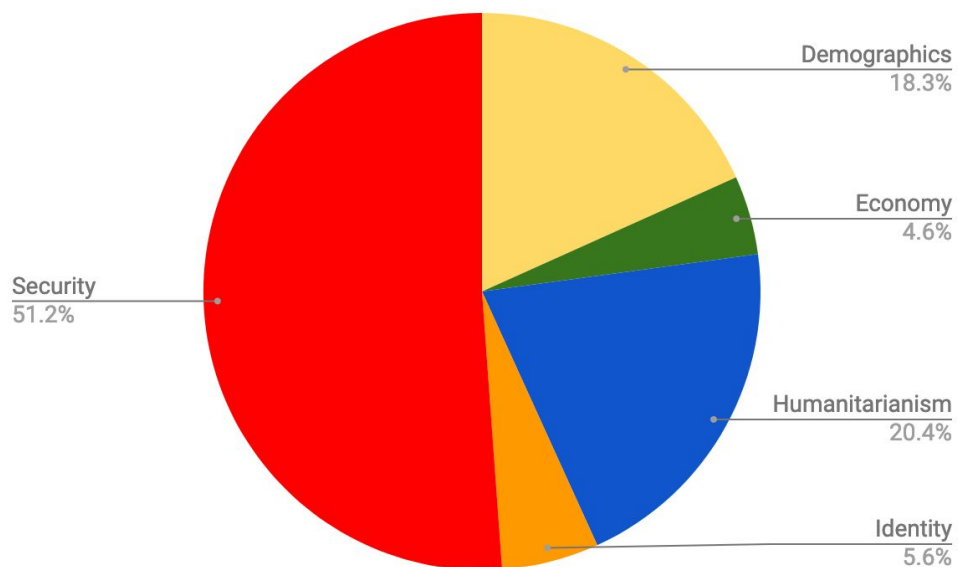
The Bulgarian discourse was primarily based on daily news about migration issues locally or abroad within the security narrative (policing, crimes, etc.), with two notable spikes around a domestic scandal and the international news surrounding the EU summit.

**Results:**

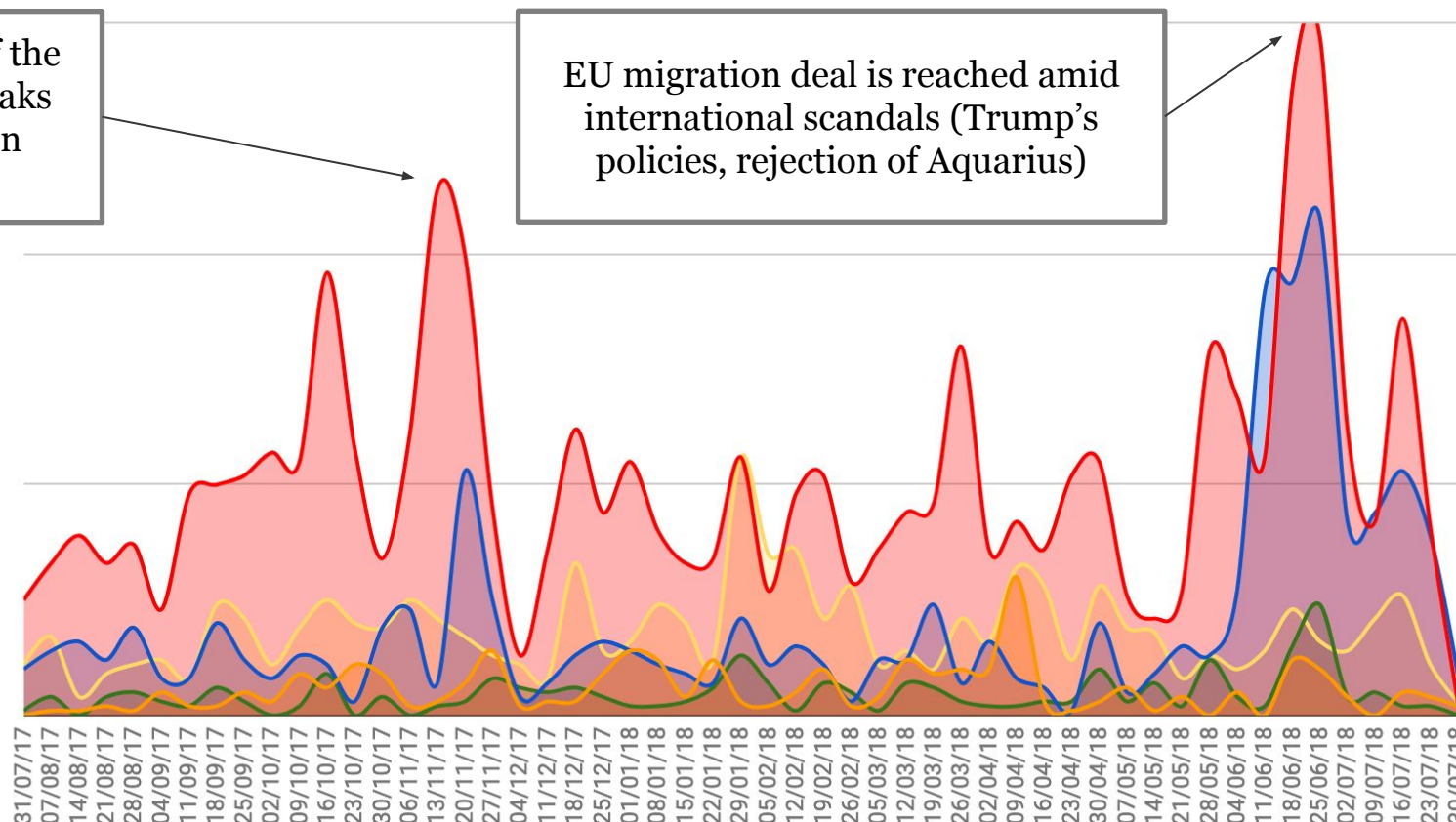
~96k

Bad weather destroys a piece of the border: corruption scandal breaks over it's detrimental effects on security

EU migration deal is reached amid international scandals (Trump's policies, rejection of Aquarius)



Demographics Economy Humanitarianism Identity Security



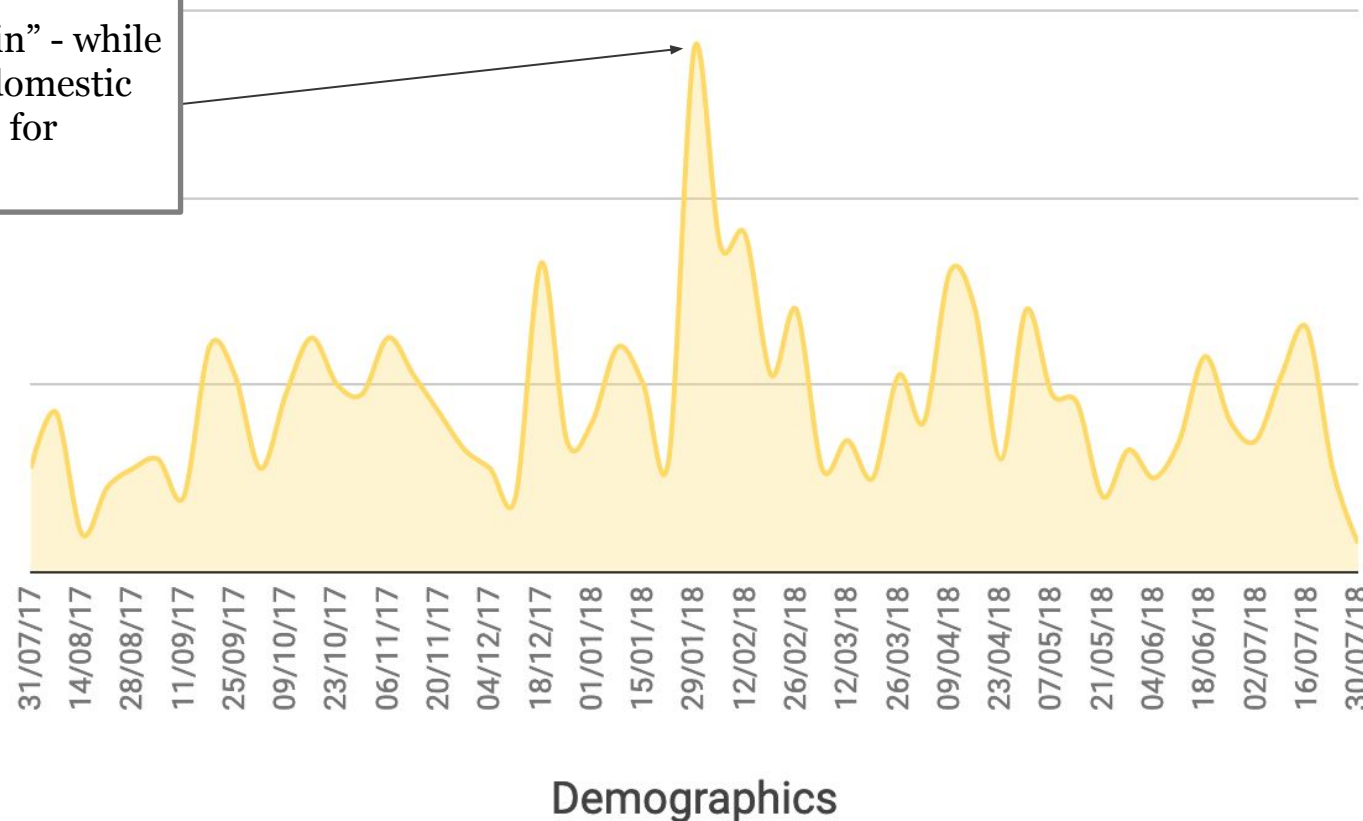
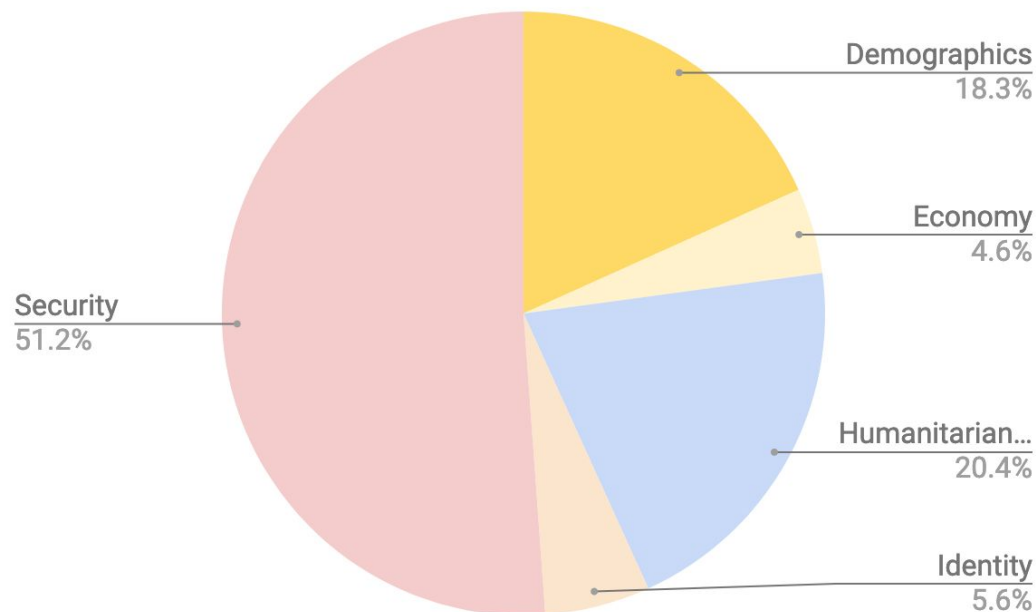
# Pan-European Narratives | BG

## Demographics (1)

The **demographic** narrative was the third largest slice of the conversation around migration. **Emigration** was contrasted with the appalling idea of replacing the population with foreign migrants, while the discourse also served as a conduit to talk about Bulgaria's local economic issues and poor quality of life. Within this, concepts of **remigration** or accepting migrant workers from **neighbouring countries** was discussed.

**Results:**  
~5k

"Want to raise a child in Bulgaria? Think again" - while conditions are slowly improving, the poor domestic economic situation is the prime reason for **emigration**.





# Pan-European Narratives | BG

## Demographics (2)

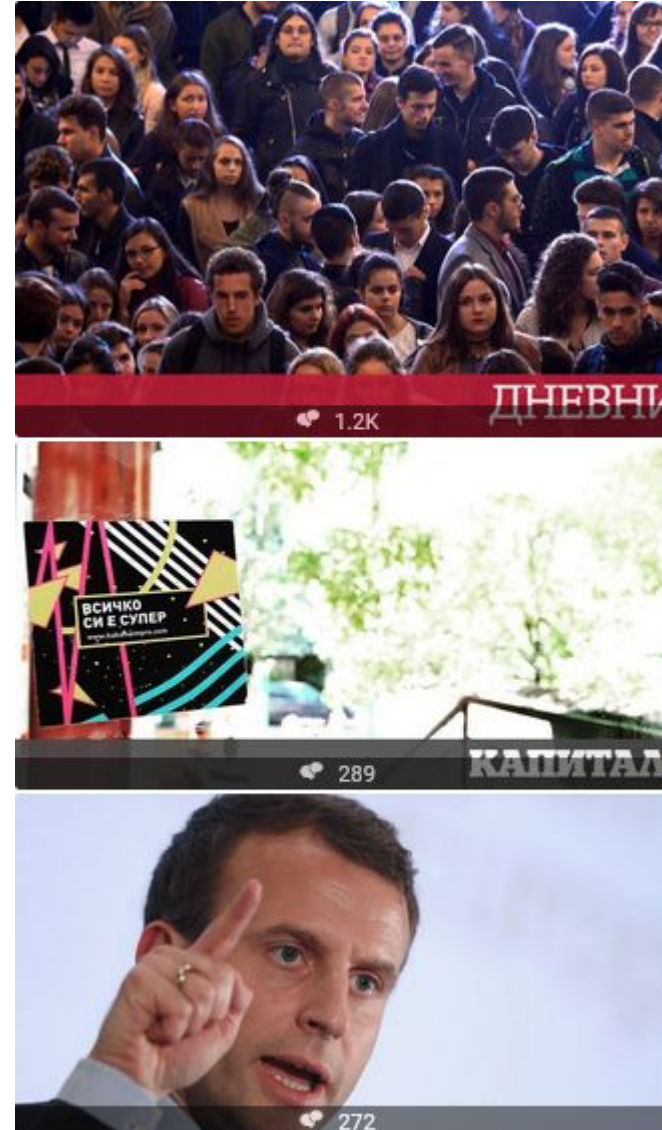
### ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

The demographic crisis is caused by *emigration* and won't be solved by *immigration*

*The demographic crisis and labour shortage should be solved with Bulgarians, not migrants.*

*Labor shortages, educated and qualified staff will be a problem in the future that could become a crisis if action is not taken, said George Gyokova BSP.*

*The bulgarian economic imigrants are pivotal for the economy. In the last years they have invested more money in the economy than the direct foreign investments.*



The images in demography were technically oriented, talking about the possibility and impact of Bulgarian emigrants coming home - while the perception of EU migration policies were framed as if they're trying to *replace* the missing labour with third-world immigrants: a position considered unacceptable.

# Pan-European Narratives | BG

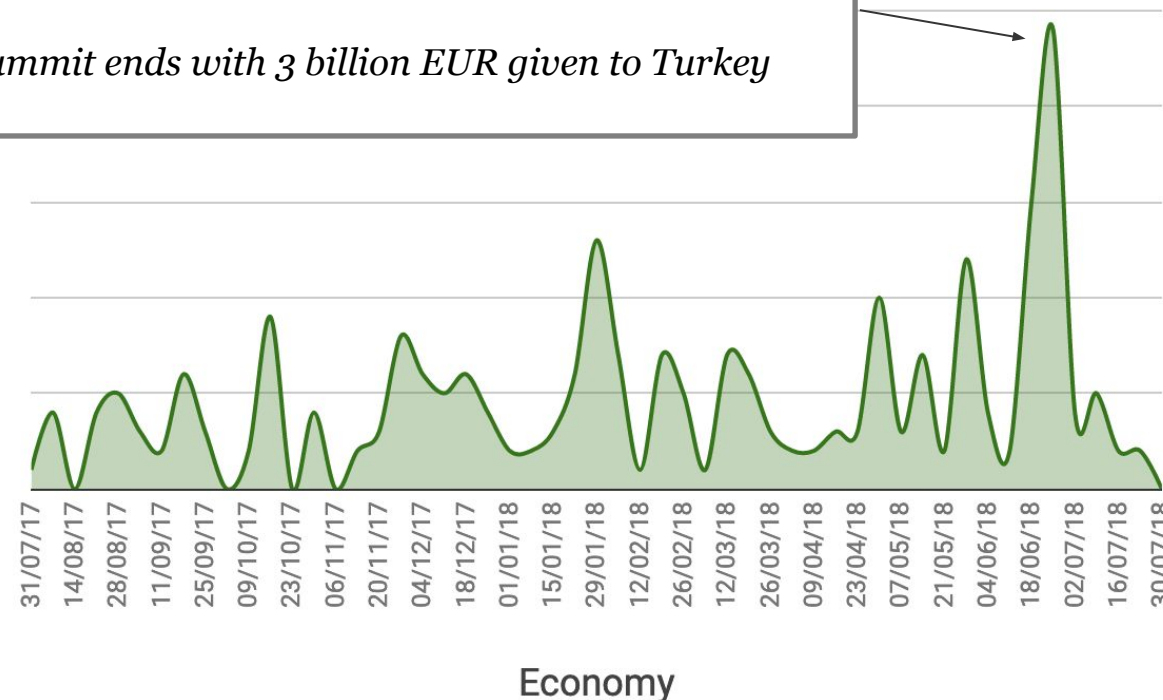
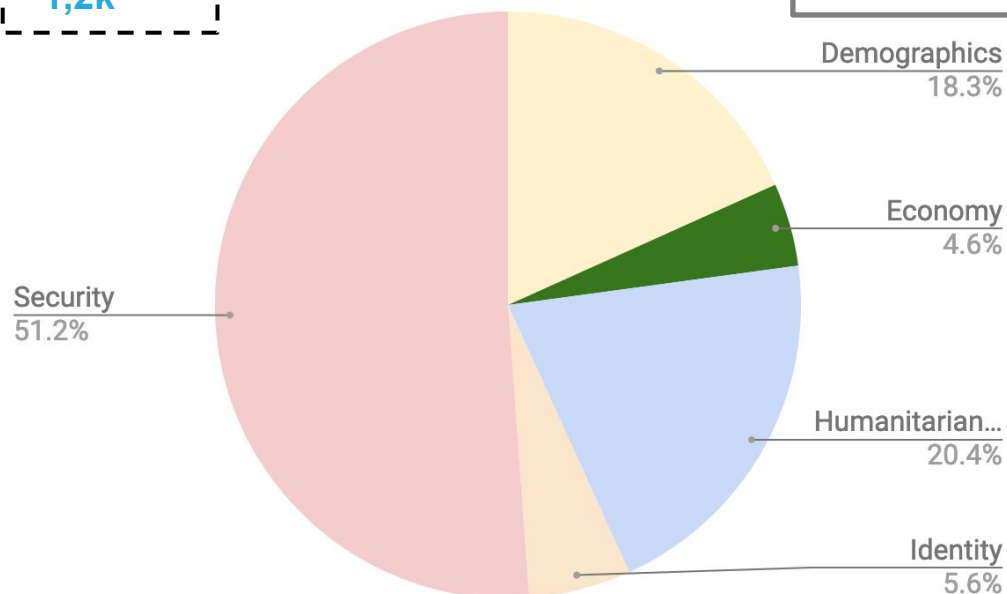
## Economy (1)

The economic discourse on migration was the smallest in Bulgaria, and was mostly concerned with the EU budget related to the crisis. This included discussions on vetoing the budget proposal by Viktor Orbán, as well as the deal with Turkey on keeping migration at bay.

Overall the conversation represented a view that since Bulgaria was guarding the borders of Europe, which is costly, it should be compensated for this task by the EU, and Prime Minister Boyko Borisov used his presidency to successfully secure this funding.

**Results:**  
~1,2k

*European migration summit ends with 3 billion EUR given to Turkey*



## ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

Migration is a burden for the economy because of the security costs

*Not only a few countries should bear the (financial) burden of the migration crisis. According to her we should not close our eyes that these people are not refugees but illegal migrants.*

*Bigger challenges require greater resources - so we offer almost triple the budget in border security.*

*Bulgaria is one of the countries that suffers the most from the migration crisis because it is a border country. European commission should allocate resources to alleviate the burden on the Bulgarian budget.*



Images in the economic discourse mostly mirror the dominant subjects: the need for EU level funding aid, in terms of covering security, as well as emphasizing the possibility of budget vetoes from the anti-immigrant bloc.

# Pan-European Narratives | BG

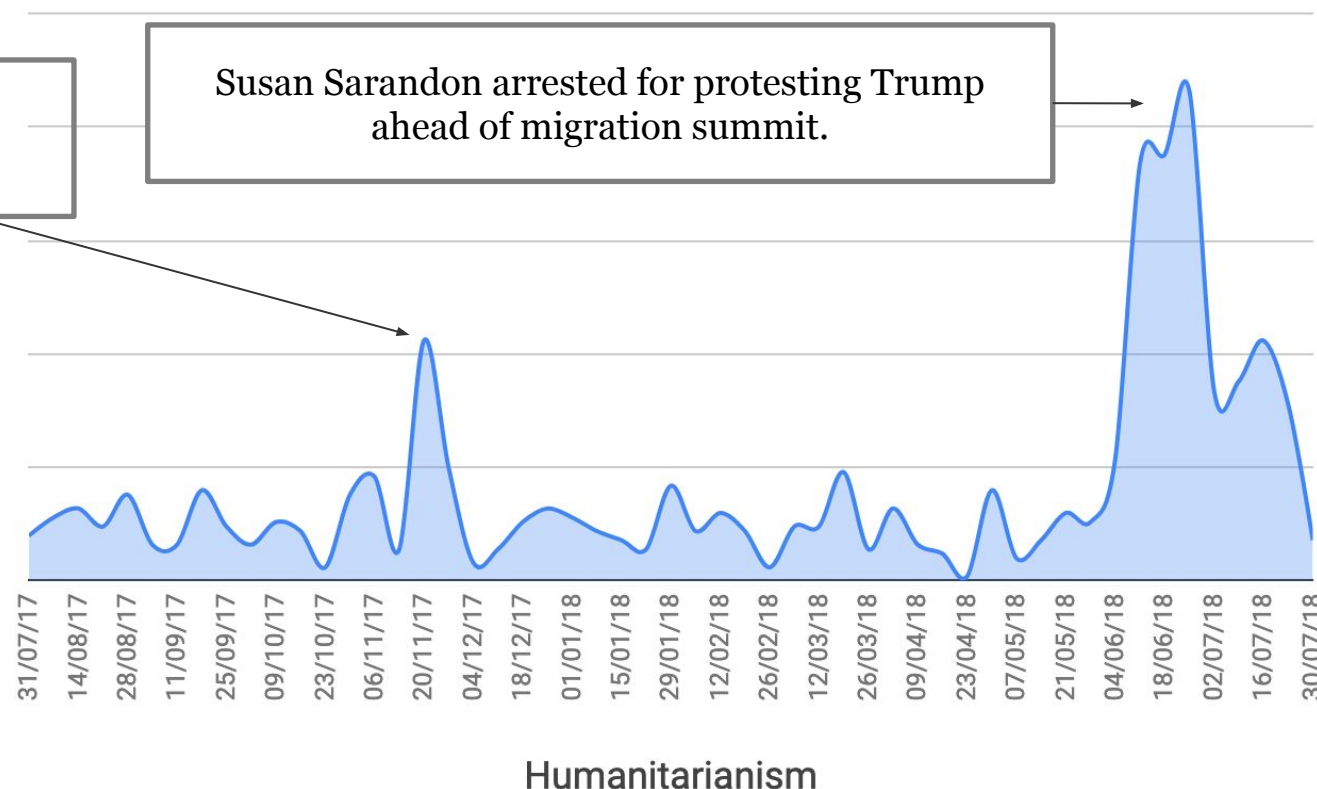
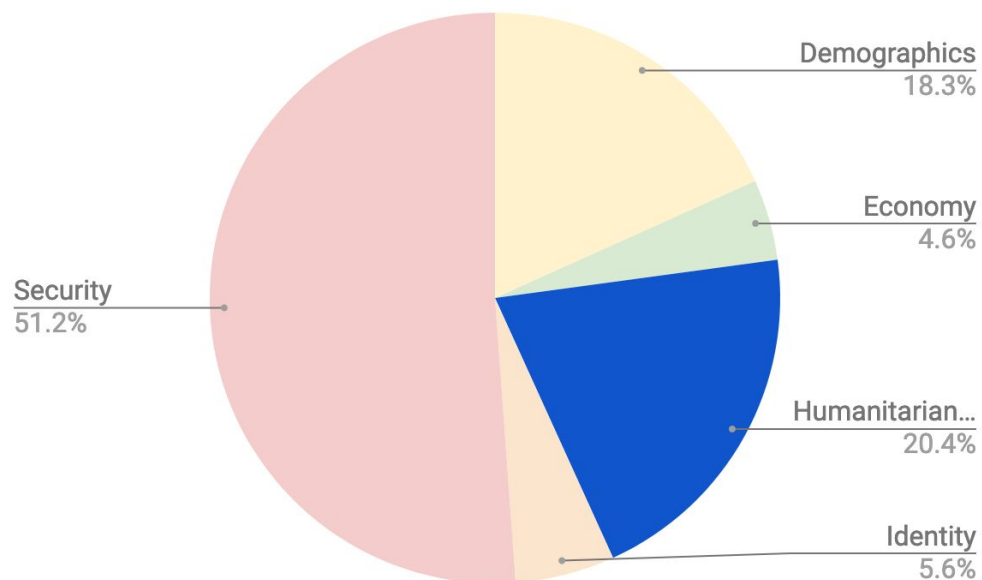
## Humanitarianism (1)

Humanitarianism was the second biggest conversation: however, despite the relatively large number of migrants present in Bulgaria, the conversation revolved almost exclusively around the situation of migrants abroad, mostly related to the events occurring on the sea. The biggest spike in the conversation around the EU migration summit also curiously came from Susan Sarandon being arrested in the US for protesting Trump's migration policies, showing that in this press environment, local anxieties could be discussed through foreign news, not local ones.

**Results:**  
~22k

Frontex Bulgarian crew saves migrants from drowning.

Susan Sarandon arrested for protesting Trump ahead of migration summit.





# Pan-European Narratives | BG

## Humanitarianism (2)

### ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

Humanitarianism is considered foreign naivety

*Everybody who trespassed the border should be expelled. That is not inhumane because that is how we save lives. The smugglers, which trade with human lives, do not care of the migrants.*

*Very powerful hybrid attack had pictures of corpses in the Mediterranean. They got the media to force Merkel's hand and she said, "Come..."*

*Some municipality councils in Bulgaria decide on their meetings that they won't accept any immigrants, we believe that with this video we will change the perspectives toward the immigrants kids (in reference to a humanitarian ad campaign)*



The images classified as humanitarian were predominantly dealing with the treatment and situation of migrants abroad.



# Pan-European Narratives | BG

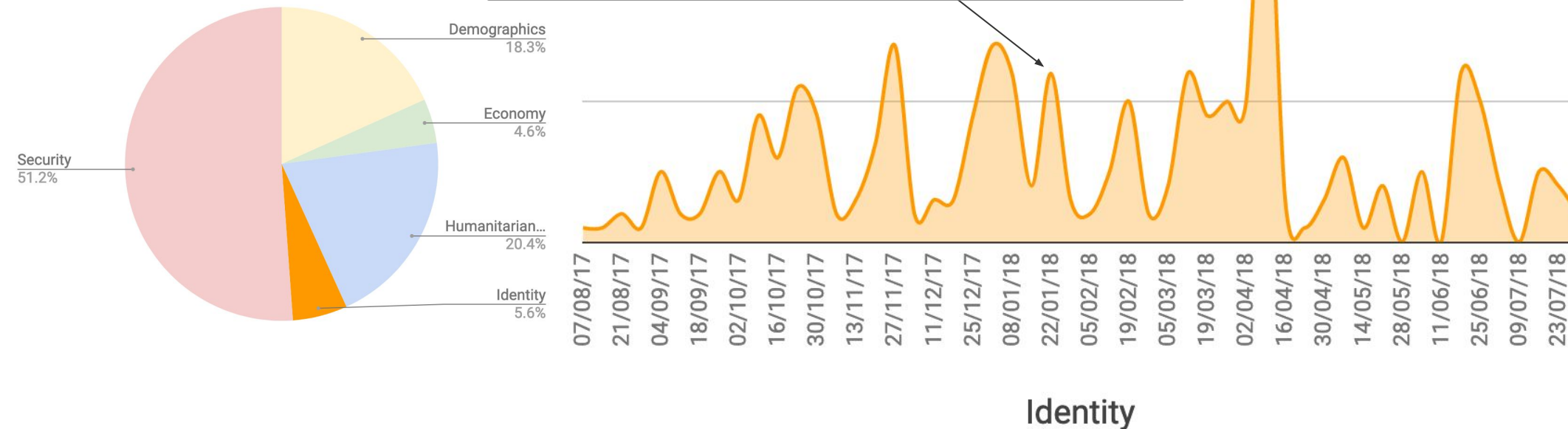
## Identity and Customs (1)

Identity was discussed in a European context - which is decidedly portrayed as Christian and not Islamic, or “gendered”. Thus the two dominant elements of these narratives were Viktor Orbán and Fidesz, viewed as the protector of these values, leading the revolt against the Western “liberal” elites, and the other was the Istanbul convention - viewed as giving undue privileges to migrants and overwriting Christian concepts of family and gender.

**Results:**  
~1,5k

*The proposed text of the Istanbul convention causes outrage, viewed as a product of “gender ideology”.*

*Viktor Orbán wins Hungarian election: this is discussed with glee as a step towards protecting a Christian Europe.*



# Pan-European Narratives | BG

## Identity and Customs (2)

### ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

Migration is a vehicle with which to destroy the Christian identity of Europe

*The situation is such that those who do not block the migration of its borders will be lost. They are slowly but surely being assimilated.*

*Orban said that Hungary would remain a Christian country, unlike Mrs. Merkel, who boast that Islam is now part of Germany.*

*Their major goal is to transform Europe to lead in a post-Christian era, an era in which nations disappear.*



The leading images in the identity discourse were about the “gender threat” coming with the Istanbul convention, or opinion pieces praising Orbán, or Orbán and Fidesz themselves.

# Pan-European Narratives | BG

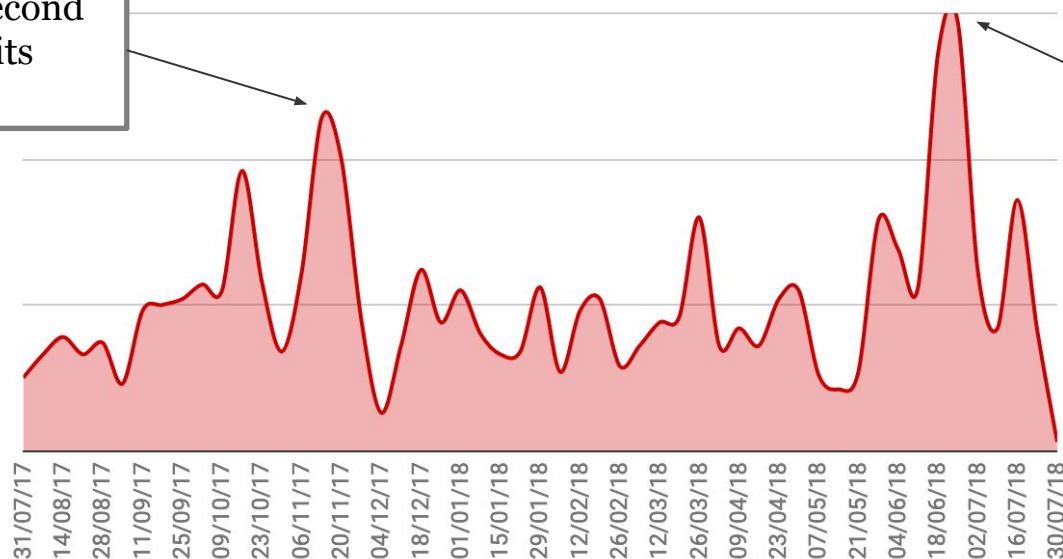
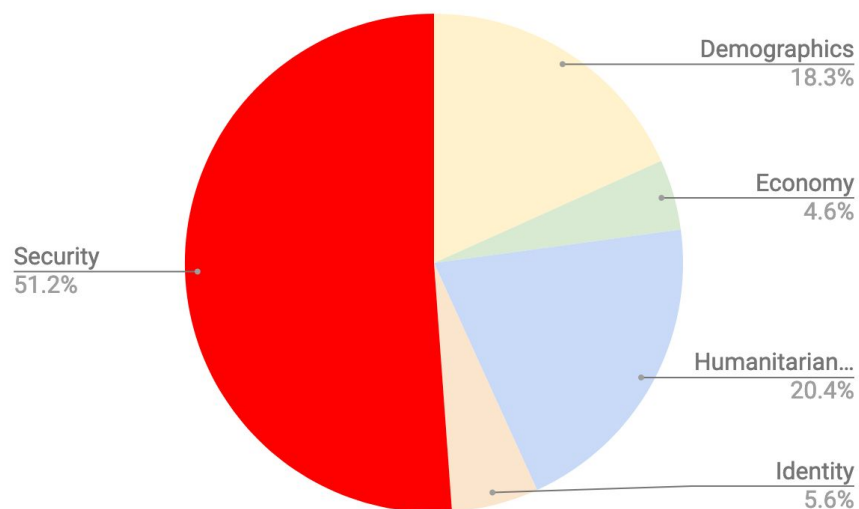
## Security (1)

Security was the largest narrative in Bulgaria. Pro-government media was full of news about crimes committed by migrants, human trafficking, police efforts involved in handling migration, illegal border crossing, and so on. The conversation is universally **anti-migration**.

Interestingly, **corruption** was discussed within the security narrative, as bad weather damaged the border fence, raising issues about poor money handling affecting security. The government then passed a law that bars reporters from taking pictures of the fence or going near it, further eroding the freedom of the press.

**Results:**  
**~54k**

Weather destroys part of the border fence: second spike is when the law was passed that limits reporting of the fence.



Law passes that forbids re-accepting migrants who went through Bulgaria before EU28 migration summit.

Security



### ANTI-MIGRANT VOICES

#### Migrants are criminals who are costly to police

*We built a fence, invested in the police, we even send the army, we got financial support from the EC, and we can say that the migration pressure on us has been brought to zero. Thanks to Bulgarian efforts we are keeping the European border safe.*

*A few neighbourhoods have become too dangerous to even pass through there. There has been serious criminal activity related to issuing bulgarian IDs.*

*Bulgaria cannot agree with the internal distribution of migrants because it would lead to more pressure on the external borders.*



The images in Bulgarian media within the **security** context are clear: migrants are viewed as an object of policing, which ties in to the economic narrative of costs.

This underlines the tension that was present prior to the EU summit regarding the question that migrants should be moved back to the country they entered through or not.

In a tightly controlled media environment, **corruption** could be discussed through the failure of the security infrastructure due to the relatively avoidable and minor event of bad weather.

# + *Local Issues in Bulgaria Around Migration*



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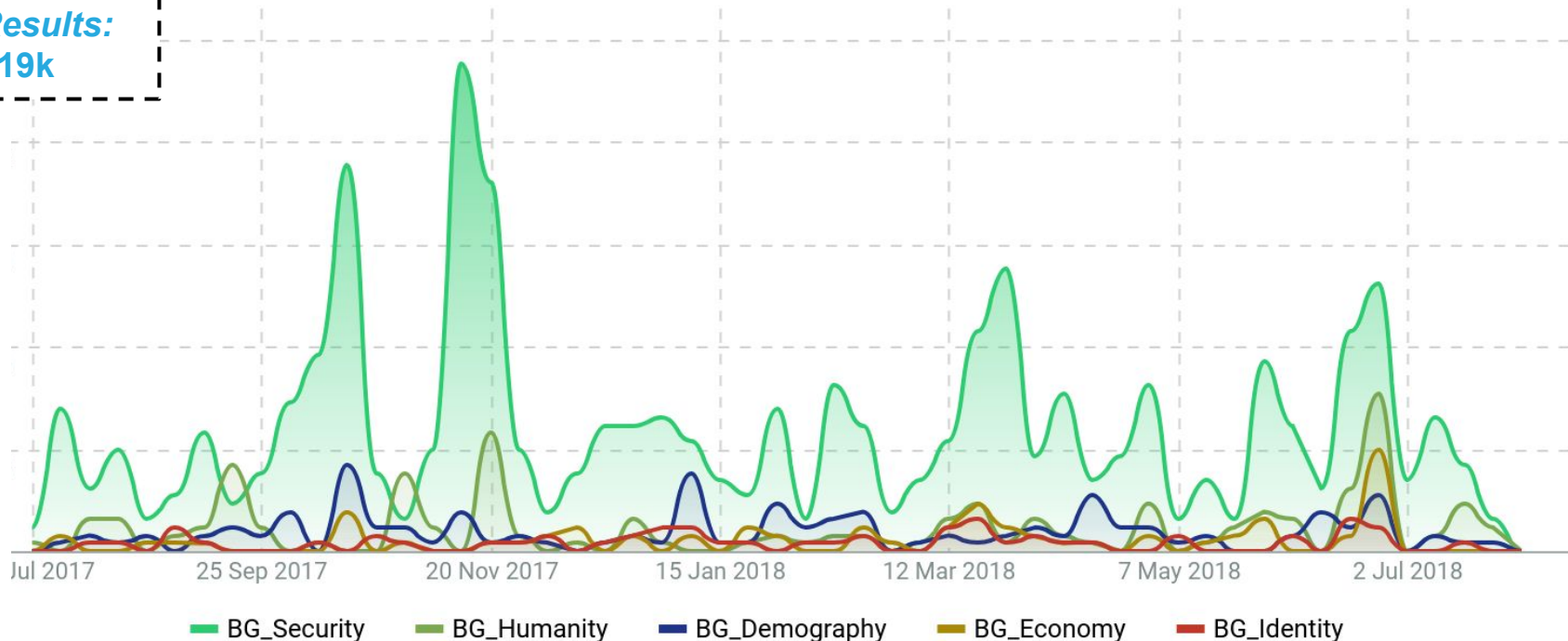
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# Local Issues | BG

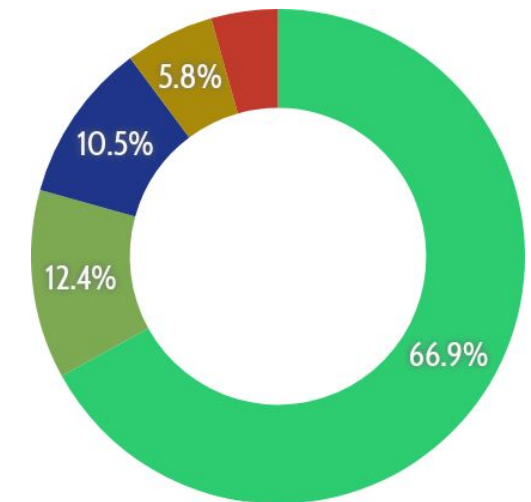
## Turkey

Turkey was mentioned in over 20% of the comments due to the shared border, and a shared uneasy history of the Ottoman Empire. Questions of security were brought up most often, with anxieties over Turkey's blocking of the flow of migrants and the country's ability to release them unless a good deal is passed by the EU under the temporary leadership of Bulgaria.

Results:  
~19k



The composition of the Turkey discourse leans towards security because of the shared border



- BG\_Security
- BG\_Humanity
- BG\_Demography
- BG\_Economy
- BG\_Identity





# Local Issues | BG

## *Press Freedom Situation*

Bulgaria ranks the lowest in the EU in terms of Freedom of the Press according to Reporters Without Borders\*. As the conversation was predominantly driven by online news outlets with direct ties to the government or pro-government business interests, this has an undeniable effect on the conversation.

Two examples come to mind: while emigration is usually a local topic in the Eastern-European region, it was a much smaller part of the discourse in Bulgaria, even though Demographics came as the third narrative. Secondly: Bulgaria has a **relatively large number of migrants in different camps**, however the **humanitarian** discourse in the country was largely about **foreign events**. Mentions of **migrants domestically almost always fell under the security umbrella**.

While these patterns can emerge organically, knowing that criticism of the government in Bulgarian media is strongly discouraged or outright barred, we may say that the discourse is heavily influenced by governing interests.

Bulgarian migrant camp representation in the news: foreign media above, local below.





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



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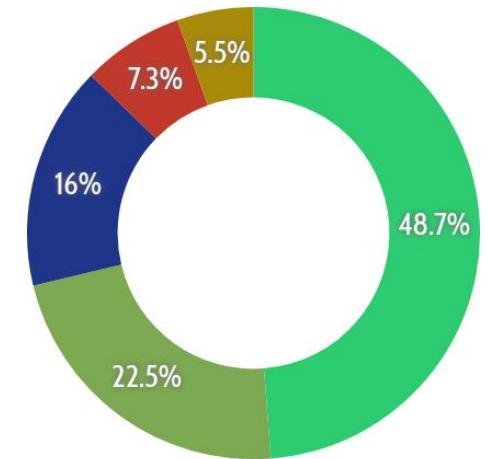
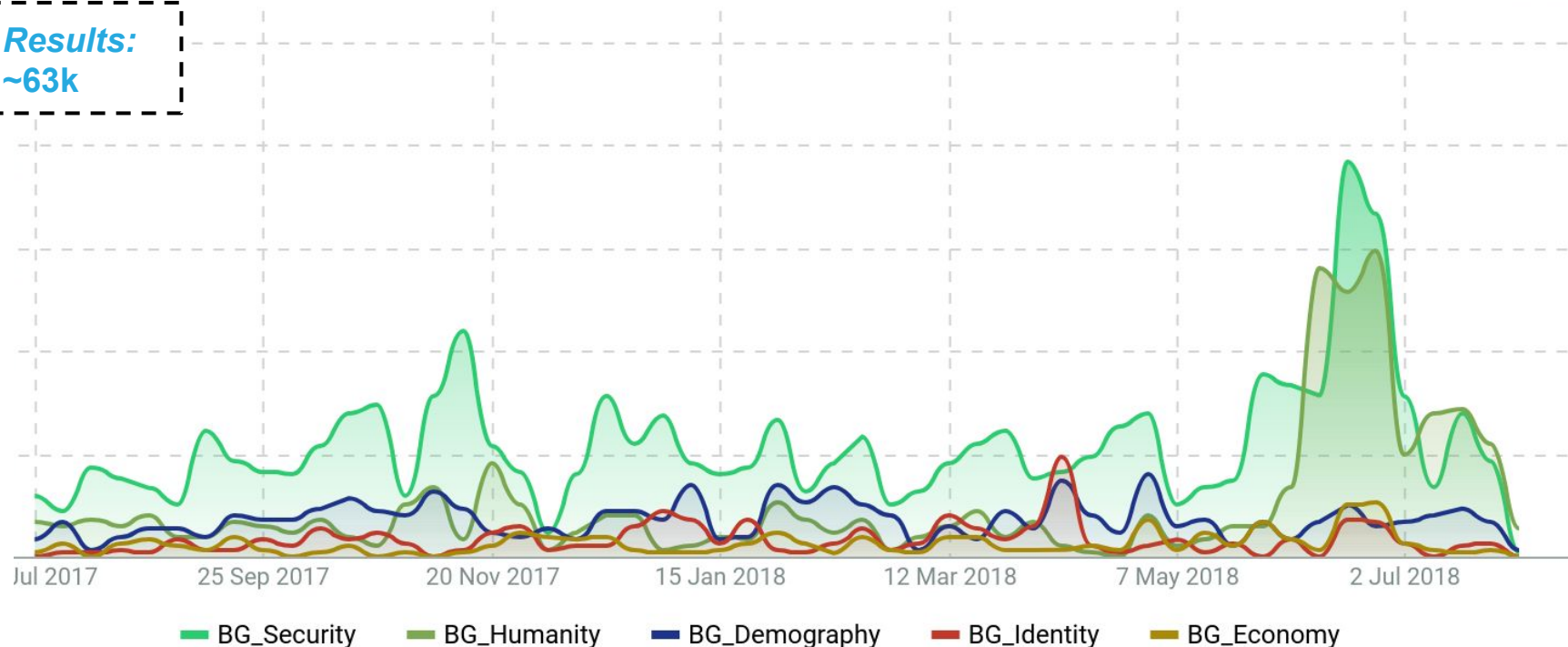
# European and Domestic Politics Context within Narratives | BG

## European References are Strongest in Security

European political references were mentioned in 66% of the observed comments. The reason for this is not only Bulgaria holding the EU presidency during the observed time period. The EU migration summit was the most important subject judged by the data out of fears that Bulgaria would need to accept all migrants who passed through its territory.

In addition, humanitarian views were expressed in events on foreign waters, which included references to other EU politicians - with a notable interest in other right wing populists, such as Orbán, Salvini or Kurz.

Results:  
~63k



● BG\_Security  
● BG\_Humanity  
● BG\_Demography  
● BG\_Identity  
● BG\_Economy



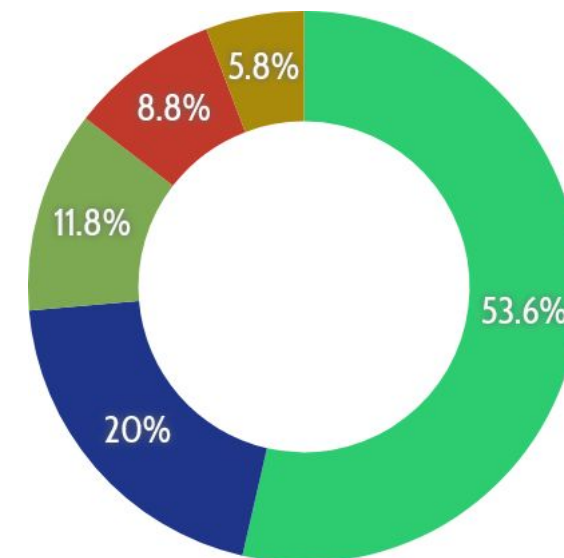
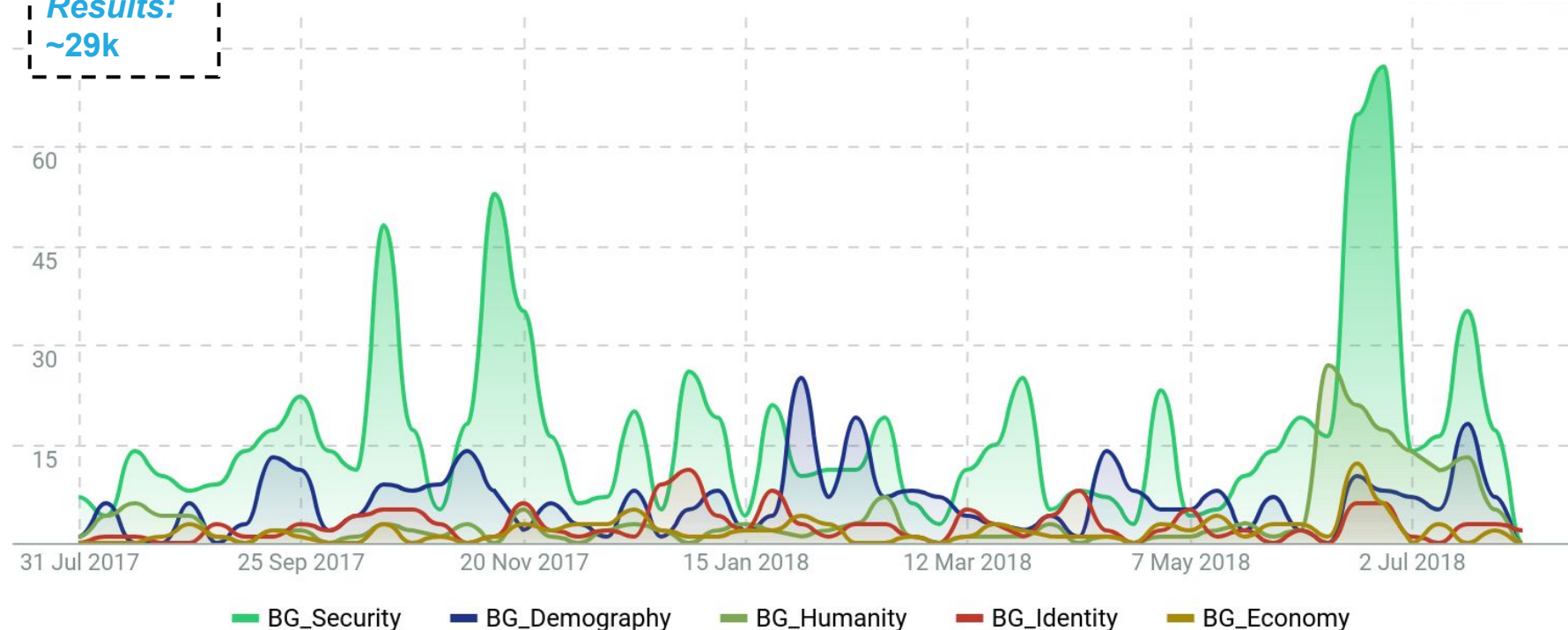
# European and Domestic Politics Context within Narratives | BG

## Domestic politics: discussed through security

Domestic politics - such as corruption or quality of life in the country - made their way through the migration discourse through **security** and **demographics**.

Naturally, the Borisov government's tough stance on immigration and call for better border control on the EU summit, as well as their programs of remigration were also discussed.

Results:  
~29k



● BG\_Security  
● BG\_Demography  
● BG\_Humanity  
● BG\_Identity  
● BG\_Economy



# + *Conversation Channels*



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4.

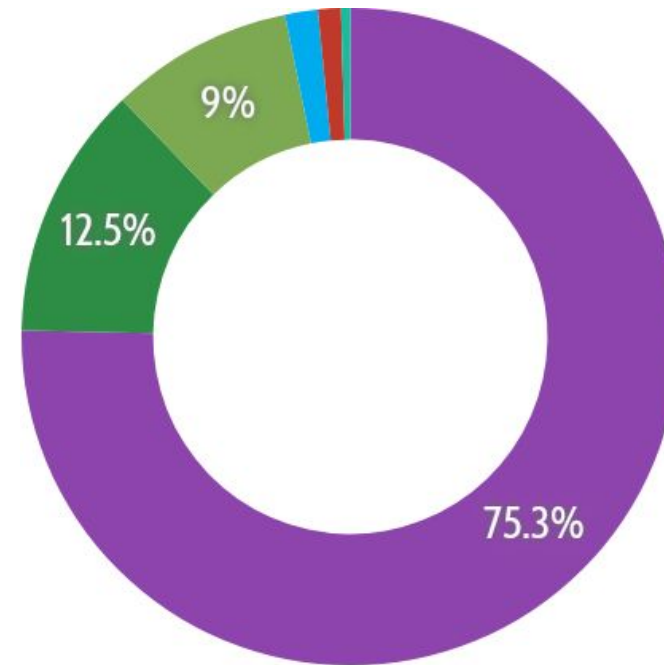




# Channel Distribution | BG

## Online news drives the conversation

75% of the conversation came from online news sources - and as noted previously, these mostly belonged to media holdings where the ownership is directly or indirectly tied to the government. While this can only be indirectly glanced from the data not only by what emerges from the conversation (echoing government viewpoints), but also through what content is missing when compared to other countries.



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



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