

Debating the legitimacy of borders: How the inclusion and exclusion of migrants and refugees is justified across the world

In the past years, the number of refugees and asylum seekers has increased substantially across the world. The UNHCR currently counts nearly 30 million persons in need of international protection, e.g. Syrians fleeing civil war, Rohingya escaping from religious violence in Myanmar, or people leaving the unstable situation in Venezuela. This has increased the pressure on destination countries to open up their borders to those seeking protection.

In principle, the liberal script offers two conflicting views whether immigrants should have access to another country. It grants nation states the right to control their borders in the name of collective self-determination, while also recognizing an individual's rights against arbitrary exclusion. With respect to the special group of refugees, however, the liberal script gives priority to the principle of the protection of the individual. According to international law, all countries are equally obliged not to push back refugees and asylum seekers and not to discriminate between them on the grounds of ethnicity, religion, origin etc.

In practice, however, countries vary widely in terms of their public discourses on refugees and asylum seekers, and the number and kinds of refugees they admit. This project aims to understand how the admission or rejection of refugees is legitimized in different countries by comparing the public discourses on refugees in six countries: Chile, Germany, Poland, Singapore, Turkey and Kenya or Uganda.

More specifically, we pursue two research questions:

- a) We reconstruct the arguments, narratives and frames mobilized in public discourses to justify the admission or exclusion of forced migrants.
- b) We attempt to explain differences in the framing of refugees between countries and within countries.

To answer these questions, we conduct a comparative qualitative discourse analysis of parliamentary debates. We complement the discourse analysis with interviews with key actors in the public sphere to understand their discursive strategies.

We argue that the variety of national discourses on the admission of refugees is primarily shaped by a country's national self-understanding and how actors construct a nation's collective identity. Accordingly, differences in the definition of one's own identity lead to differences in the definition of "otherness".