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FRAMING REFUGEES

How the Admission
of Refugees is
Debated in Six
Countries across
the World

Daniel Drewski
Jürgen Gerhards



Framing Refugees

CONTESTATIONS OF THE LIBERAL SCRIPT—SCRIPTS

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Framing Refugees

*How the Admission of Refugees is Debated in
Six Countries across the World*

Daniel Drewski
and
Jürgen Gerhards

SCRIPTS

CLUSTER OF EXCELLENCE

Contestations of the Liberal Script

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Bamberg/Berlin September 2023
Daniel Drewski & Jürgen Gerhards

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PART I
INTRODUCTION

1

Setting the stage

1. The issue and research question

Across the world, the number of people who are forcibly displaced from their homes because of political persecution, conflict, or serious human rights violations has more than doubled during the last decade. As of 2022, around 46 million people have been forced to leave their country and seek refuge abroad (UNHCR 2023).¹ One of the largest refugee displacements originates in the Middle East, where 6.7 million Syrians have fled the regime of Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian civil war since 2011 and sought shelter in neighboring Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, and also in the EU, mostly in Germany. In the Americas, around 6.6 million Venezuelans have escaped political instability and socioeconomic crisis under Socialist President Nicolás Maduro, crossing the border to Colombia and other destinations, mostly in Central and South America. The largest refugee displacement in Africa originates in South Sudan, with around 2.3 million registered refugees in neighboring states, mostly Uganda. In Southeast Asia, 1.3 million Rohingya, a stateless Muslim minority in Myanmar, sought safety from violence and persecution by crossing the border to Bangladesh or embarking in boats toward the shores of other Southeast Asian countries. The most recent displacement occurred in Europe, with 5.7 million Ukrainian refugees fleeing the Russian invasion since the beginning of 2022.²

These displacements have increased the pressure on destination countries to open their borders to refugees and grant them protection. In principle, admitting refugees who seek asylum from war and persecution is not only considered a humanitarian duty but is also encoded in what we call the “liberal script.” A script consists of normative ideas and institutional prescriptions regarding the organization of a society (Meyer 1980; Börzel & Zürn 2020), including ideas about who may and may not cross the border of a nation-state and immigrate to a country. We have argued in our previous research that contemporary international law increasingly reflects the tenets of the “liberal script,” which is characterized by an inherent tension between the principle of individual self-determination, including the right of free movement, on the one hand, and the principle of collective self-determination, including the state’s right to close its borders, on the other (Drewski & Gerhards 2020). In principle, the liberal script and its institutionalization in international law grant nation-states the right to

¹ Another 62.5 million are internally displaced persons.

² The exact number of refugees is often difficult to determine and may vary between different sources because many refugees are not registered, there is return migration, and new displacements.

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control access to their territory in the name of the collective self-determination of its citizens. Consequently, migration policy falls within the domestic jurisdiction of each state, which means that states can freely decide whom to admit and whom to reject. However, when it comes to refugees, the tension between the self-determination of the nation-state and individual rights is resolved in favor of the individuals whose lives are threatened, meaning that the individual right to be protected from persecution and serious human rights violations trumps any state's right to control access to its territory.³

The philosophical justification of this liberal script in regard to refugees has already been formulated in Immanuel Kant's text "*Vom ewigen Frieden: Ein philosophischer Entwurf*" (Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch; Kant 2008 [1795]). Kant argues that peace between states is not a given but has to be promoted by a comprehensive legal framework. Three legal systems are necessary to achieve this: civil law that coordinates the relation of people within a state, a law of nations that codifies intergovernmental relations, and the so-called law of world citizenship (*ius cosmopolitanum*), which applies to all people worldwide. The latter is especially important for this book. It includes the right to visit other states without being treated with hostility. According to Kant, a visitor cannot be turned away if their life is threatened. This right implies that people seeking refuge in another country because of conflict or political persecution in their home country may not be denied access.⁴

Kant was influential, yet it took more than 150 years before the international community was able to agree on the core liberal idea that every human being has inalienable fundamental rights, regardless of nationality, religion, ethnicity, or race. After the catastrophic experiences of the two world wars, the associated expulsion and displacement of millions of people, the experience of mass extermination of Jews, and the refusal of many countries to grant asylum to Jewish refugees, the right to seek asylum was declared a fundamental human right by Article 14 of the UN Human Rights Declaration in 1948 (United Nations 2023). The individual right to be protected from persecution and serious human rights violations would trump any state's right to deny access to its territory. The normative point of reference is the individual's right to life and human dignity, which the international community of states has the duty to protect. As the historian Peter Gatrell (2013) has demonstrated in his book *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, this is the first time in history that individuals as human beings, rather than particular groups, are defined as those who need to be protected (despite the narrowness of the refugee definition, which considers refugees only those who are politically persecuted).

The "Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees" drafted in 1951 in Geneva further specifies the rights of refugees and asylum seekers on the one hand and the

³ In her more recent book, Rebecca Hamlin (2021) rightfully criticizes the binary distinction between "migrants" and "refugees," as the motives to migrate are often complex and intertwined. Nevertheless, this distinction is an essential component of what we call the "liberal script."

⁴ Kant points out that this is a right to visit and not a right to stay in the sense of a permanent right of residence (Kant 2008 [1795]: 357). Therefore, a country is not obliged to host a persecuted person once their reason for persecution has become obsolete and they are no longer in danger in the home country.

obligations of states on the other. States must not penalize refugees for crossing a border irregularly nor return refugees to where they might face threats to their life or freedom (known as the principle of “non-refoulement”) (UNHCR 1951, Article 33(1)). Additionally, states are not allowed to discriminate between refugee populations based on race, religion, or country of origin (UNHCR 1951, Article 3). Either the Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol or both have been ratified by 149 states of the world, even if the influence of the various states in drafting the Convention was unevenly distributed.⁵ Only a number of states in Southeast Asia and the Middle East have so far declined to ratify it. Nevertheless, its fundamental precepts—such as the principle of non-refoulement—have become part of international customary law, which means they also bind the few remaining states that are not party to the Convention.

Thus, international human rights and refugee law have come to define a set of universal norms and principles that should bind all nations across the world. However, the reality is quite different. Governments of different countries (and different political parties within countries) respond in very different ways to the pressure to admit refugees: Some support opening their borders and granting extensive protection, others want to close their borders and push back refugees, and yet others prefer to admit some groups of refugees while excluding others. The key argument we develop in this book is that these policy positions on admitting refugees are embedded in and shaped by the political actors’ framing of the collective identity and characteristics of their nation and the corresponding perceptions of the refugees. Consider, for instance, just how different the political leaders of Germany, Poland, and Turkey have responded to a similar challenge, namely the large refugee flow from Syria in recent years, based on very different interpretations of who “we” and “they,” the refugees, are.

In the late summer of 2015, Germany decided to suspend the EU’s so-called “Dublin Regulation” for Syrians, which required authorities to send asylum seekers back to where they first entered the EU. This suspension effectively meant opening Germany’s borders to Syrian refugees. In her summer press conference, Chancellor Angela Merkel justified this policy with the now famous appeal to Germany’s (economic) strength: “Germany is a strong country. The motive with which we approach these things must be: We have achieved so much—we can do it! We can do it, and where something stands in our way, it has to be overcome, it has to be worked on” (Angela Merkel, CDU, August 31, 2015).

She then called on Europe’s history and identity as a defender of universal civil rights to push for a European-wide approach to refugee management:

Then there is the European dimension, and here I believe that we can say that Europe as a whole must move. States must share responsibility for refugees seeking asylum. Universal civil rights have so far been closely linked to Europe and its

⁵ Among others, Ulrike Krause (2021) has drawn attention to the fact that colonial powers dominated discussions during the 1951 Convention’s founding conference, whereas representatives from former colonies were marginalized.

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history. That is one of the founding impulses of the European Union. If Europe fails on the refugee issue, this close link with universal civil rights will break. It will be destroyed, and it will not be the Europe that we imagine and not the Europe that, as a founding myth, we must continue to develop today. (Angela Merkel, CDU, August 31, 2015)

However, such a common “European solution,” consisting of relocating refugees based on quotas within the EU, could not be achieved. The main opposition came from the so-called “Visegrád Group,” a group of four Central European states (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Slovakia), who considered the quotas an intrusion into their national sovereignty. In Poland, for instance, the tone of the opposition was set by Jaroslaw Kaczyński, leader of the Polish Law and Justice Party (PiS), which would win the 2015 parliamentary elections on an anti-refugee platform. He justified his opposition to the relocation mechanism by describing Muslim refugees as a threat to Christian heritage in Poland and Europe:⁶

First, the number of foreigners rises rapidly, then they don't abide by the law, they don't want to abide by the law, they declare they won't abide by our law, our customs. And then, or even at the same time, they impose their sensibility and their requirements in the public sphere, in various areas of life—and very aggressively and vehemently at that. If someone says it's not true, one should look around Europe, Sweden for example. There are 54 areas where the sharia law is in force with no state control whatsoever. ...Do you want this to appear in Poland, so that we'll cease to be hosts in our own country? Do you want that? (Jaroslaw Kaczyński, PiS, September 16, 2015)

In Turkey, meanwhile, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan pronounced an “open door policy” as soon as the first refugees arrived from neighboring Syria in 2011. In the years that followed, Turkey became by far the largest host country of Syrian refugees in the world. In a 2015 speech, President Erdoğan appealed to Turkey's Ottoman past and Islamic heritage to justify his country's commitment to hosting Syrian refugees:

As Turkey, we have always kept open our hearts and doors to our brothers and sisters in Syria and Iraq as we did to our brothers and sisters in the Balkans, Central Asia, North Africa, Africa, and other regions of Asia. And we will continue to do so. What matters to us is our common history, cultural proximity, civilization partnership and the humane values we share with these brothers and sisters. What we call Syria and Iraq at present, were geographies no different to us than Mardin,

⁶ Notably, at the same time, Poland began preparing to receive refugees from neighboring Ukraine, following the Euromaidan protests and the military conflict between Ukraine and pro-Russian separatists in the Eastern Donbas region. And a few years later, in 2022, Poland performed an astounding about-face in terms of its refugee policy, when it opened its borders to more than a million refugees fleeing the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which suggests that Poland is not against admitting refugees per se, just to certain groups of refugees.

Diyarbakır, Gaziantep and Hatay just a century ago. Drawing a line between our citizens and those living in Syria and Iraq would make us embarrassed in the eyes of history, our ancestors and especially our martyrs. (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, AKP, October 1, 2015)

All these states are bound by international law and are parties to the Refugee Convention.⁷ Nevertheless, its politicians respond in very different ways to refugee admissions based on different interpretations of what their countries owe the refugees. While Merkel pleaded for the admission of Syrian refugees in Germany by interpreting this as a question of Germany's moral responsibility and economic capacity, Kaczyński rejected the admission of Syrians because he sees them as culturally incompatible with Poland's Christian heritage. In turn, Erdoğan demanded solidarity with Syrians as a question of religious and historical commonality. We argue that such stances on admitting refugees are shaped by different ideas of what constitutes the collective identity and characteristics of the host nation.

In this book, we explore these specific understandings of the nation and the corresponding perceptions of "otherness" that politicians in different countries within Europe and across the world draw on to debate the question of refugee admission. We focus on the responses in six countries that have been confronted with large numbers of refugees: Germany, Poland, and Turkey responding to the exodus of Syrian and Middle Eastern refugees, Chile's reaction to the Venezuelan displacement, Singapore and its stance toward Rohingya refugees, and Uganda facing the displacement from South Sudan. The analysis is mainly based on a qualitative content analysis of parliamentary debates and political statements of governments and political parties. Thus, we not only look at differences between the governments of different countries but also differences between political parties within countries.

2. Main argument of our study

Admitting refugees implies opening the boundaries of the nation-state (at least temporarily) and sharing resources with outsiders who claim to need protection. Consequently, we argue that political debates on admitting refugees essentially revolve around the question of who "we" are and to what extent "we" have the obligation, capacity, or interest to help. At the same time, this also raises the question of who those who claim to be refugees are and to what extent they fit "us" or can be considered worthy of protection. Thus, to better understand how countries respond to refugee crises, we examine how its politicians interpret (1) *the collective identity and characteristics of the host country* (who are "we"?) on the one hand and (2) *the identity and characteristics of the refugees* (who are "they"?) on the other. Both are

⁷ Turkey continues to keep in place the original "geographic restriction" of the Refugee Convention, which had limited its scope to refugees from Europe. However, it is bound by the principle of non-refoulement, which is part of international customary law, and it updated its legislation on migration in line with EU law in 2014.

related to each other in the sense that the answer given to the first shapes the answer to the second. For example, if the nation is defined in religious terms, refugees are most likely assessed in terms of their religious background as well and considered “to fit” or not. We use the well-established term “framing” to refer to this process of interpretation taking place in political debates.

We argue that six different frames distinguish how the nation and, correspondingly, the “others” can be defined, namely in economic, cultural, moral, legal, security-related, and international terms. This typology allows us to systematize and compare the political debates in different countries; it is described in more detail in Chapter 2. First, politicians can adopt an *economic* frame, which refers to the country’s overall economic capacity to absorb refugees, including the condition of its labor market and welfare state institutions, and assesses the refugees’ human capital. Second, political actors can mobilize a *cultural* frame. They can characterize the nation as culturally or ethnically homogenous and thus unable to assimilate foreigners, or as heterogenous and shaped by a history of immigration and, therefore, more open to accepting refugees. Accordingly, refugees are assessed in terms of their ethnic or cultural background and whether they are culturally close to or culturally distant from the host population. Third, political actors can adopt a *moral* framing, which refers to the values that define a society, such as humanitarianism or certain religious values. Within this frame, the refugees’ neediness and deservingness to receive asylum are assessed. Fourth, the moral frame can bleed into a *legal* frame. This frame refers to the laws and norms that are thought to bind the nation in matters of refugee admissions, such as the adherence to international law or constitutional guarantees, and the refugees’ rights and obligations, that is, whether they can be considered “real refugees” or “economic migrants.” Fifth, the *security* frame covers a country’s (perceived) degree of public safety and the extent to which refugees might pose a security threat as criminals or terrorists. Finally, the sixth frame refers to how the nation is positioned *internationally* relative to other countries. Admitting refugees is not only a political decision with domestic repercussions, but it can also have international implications. It can signal a strong rebuke of the regime that causes the displacement, as well as communicate where a country stands in its relations with third countries. Accordingly, refugees can be defined as political allies or enemies of the host country.

In the empirical chapters of this book, we show that the governments and the opposition parties in the six countries differ not only in the extent to which they emphasize the different frames but, more importantly, in terms of how they fill these frames with specific content and meaning. For example, the cultural frame is relevant in most cases. However, in each country, politicians draw on different cultural narratives to define who “we” are (and who, correspondingly, the “others” are), such as the reference to the Ottoman Empire and Islam in Turkey, Christianity in Poland, or Pan-Africanism in Uganda. Different concepts have been used to denote the cultural and ideational background material from which frames are constructed, for example, “cultural repertoires” (Lamont & Thévenot 2000), “cultural themes” (Gamson 1992; Díez Medrano 2003), or “cultural tool kits” (Swidler 1986). Following this literature, we demonstrate that different societies, as well as different political

constituencies within a society, have different cultural repertoires at their disposal on which politicians can draw to fill frames with meaning and with which their framing must “resonate.” These repertoires are not necessarily internally consistent (i.e., they do not constitute a cultural program that unequivocally determines action) or mutually exclusive (i.e., the cultural repertoires of different groups can partly overlap), meaning politicians retain some margin to maneuver when drawing on them strategically. However, they are constrained by the cultural repertoires at their disposal. Borrowing Max Weber’s (1988) famous switchmen metaphor, these cultural repertoires determine the tracks along which the policymaking process is directed.⁸ They enable and constrain policy choices by circumscribing what is thinkable and perceived as legitimate within a particular polity or political group.

Admitting refugees is a contested issue within many countries (though not in all, as we show in this book). Thus, our study is interested not only in describing and understanding differences between countries but also in different refugee policy positions *within* countries. A country’s government usually faces opposition from other political actors within the country who have different policy preferences—at least in more or less democratic regimes that allow political opposition.⁹ Again, we argue that the differences between a country’s political parties can only be understood if one takes into account their national self-understandings and corresponding perceptions of refugees. For example, in Poland, the liberal political opposition to the right-wing PiS government rejected the notion that accepting Syrian refugees is incompatible with Poland’s Christian heritage. Instead, it emphasized Poland’s multicultural past, going back to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth under the Jagiellonian dynasty, to justify a more welcoming policy. In other words, the nature of internal contestations over a country’s refugee admission policies depends on the different political camps’ conceptions of a nation’s collective identity and how they define the refugees. We draw on cleavage theory to make sense of these differences.

3. The cases and main findings

Our study is mainly based on a qualitative content analysis of parliamentary debates in six countries around the world. Our choice of countries follows an exploratory logic described in Chapter 3. First, we selected three countries, all confronted with the same group of refugees from the world’s largest exodus of refugees (at the start of our project), namely the “Syrian refugee crisis,” which began in 2011 and has displaced around 6.7 million people up to 2022 (UNHCR 2023). We focused on two major receiving countries: Turkey, Syria’s geographic neighbor, and Germany, the main reception country in the EU. In addition, we included Poland, a country

⁸ “However, very frequently, the ‘world images’ created by ‘ideas’ have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest” (Weber 1988: 252; own translation).

⁹ Allowing political opposition is true only to a limited extent in two of our countries of analysis, namely Singapore and Uganda (Turkey continues to have a remarkably outspoken opposition to President Erdoğan and the AKP, despite having turned increasingly authoritarian in recent years).

of the so-called “Visegrád Group” of Central and Eastern European countries that vehemently opposed the admission of Syrian refugees via the EU relocation mechanism (but recently admitted around a million Ukrainian refugees). Contrasting these countries shows how different conceptions of the nation and interpretations of refugees shape respective policy approaches to the same challenge, namely the very large number of refugees from Syria and the Middle East. The three chapters of Part II of this book are dedicated to analyzing the political debates in Turkey, Germany, and Poland.

In a second step, we selected three countries in other world regions facing major refugee movement (Chile, Singapore, and Uganda) to expand our analysis to other cases beyond Europe. This expansion allows us to assess whether our main argument and framing typology can also be applied to other regions that are less often included in comparative discourse analyses, which tend to focus on the situation in Europe and North America even though most refugees in the world are not hosted there. Chile is one of the major reception countries of displaced Venezuelans in Latin America. Like other countries in the region, it responded in an ambivalent manner, initially adopting a rather open rhetoric but a more restrictive policy. As a member of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), Singapore is confronted with the exodus of the oppressed Rohingya minority from Myanmar. But despite having one of the largest shares of migrants in the world, it refuses to accept any refugees. Lastly, Uganda has one of the most liberal refugee policies in Africa and hosts the largest refugee population in the region, originating mainly from South Sudan. The three chapters of Part III cover the cases of Uganda, Chile, and Singapore.

Of the three countries confronted with Syrian refugees, *Turkey* hosts the largest number of refugees and has, until recently, mostly pursued an open border policy. The Turkish government’s approach to Syrian refugees is embedded in the attempt to *reconnect to the heritage of the Ottoman Empire and build religious solidarity*. At the heart of President Erdoğan’s and his governing Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) open-door policy toward Syrians lies a cultural-identity construction of Turkey that draws on its Ottoman past and Islamic heritage. This framing blurs the current borders of the Turkish nation-state and includes Syrians as “brothers and sisters” in faith and as former subjects of the Ottomans in the definition of the “we.” The government’s interpretations are contested by the opposition parties represented in the Grand National Assembly in different ways. The Kemalist Republican People’s Party (CHP) rejects Erdoğan’s neo-Ottoman identity politics. Its point of departure for defining Turkish identity is the modern Turkish nation-state of 1923. According to the CHP, the task of the state should be primarily to provide for the welfare of its own citizens. Against this background, Syrian refugees are interpreted as an economic and cultural burden, as well as a security risk.

Germany took in the largest share of refugees from Syria and the Middle East among the member states in the EU, even though Syria arguably does not share a common culture with Germany, nor is it a neighbor. Its policy was shaped by the grand coalition government of Angela Merkel and can best be summarized as an attempt to serve as a *humanitarian role model*. The policy to admit refugees was

based primarily on the presumption that Germany is not only morally committed to but also legally bound by international law and its own constitutional right to asylum. This bond is derived from the “sanctity” of the German Basic Law in Germany’s postwar political culture, which enshrined the principles of human dignity and the right to asylum as a consequence of the experience of National Socialism. The cultural background of the refugees was de-emphasized in the public discourse, while their humanitarian need was highlighted. This framing was shared by all major parties in parliament, thus creating an opportunity for the rise of the populist right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) on an anti-refugee platform.

In contrast to Germany, *Poland’s* right-wing populist PiS party (in government from 2015 to 2023) consistently rejected participation in the refugee relocation mechanism proposed by the EU and refused to admit Syrian refugees. The Polish government’s response was embedded in an attempted *defense of national sovereignty and Christian identity*. Its policy was based on an understanding of Poland as a culturally homogenous Christian nation, which is unable to assimilate refugees of Muslim background, complemented by an understanding of Poland as an underdog nation whose sovereignty is threatened by the EU. The main liberal opposition party contested this framing by portraying Poland as a country with a forgotten multicultural history and a pro-European vocation. At the same time, however, both the government and the opposition signaled their readiness to receive refugees from neighboring Ukraine (a promise Poland would deliver in 2022 following the Russian invasion) because Poland shares cultural ties and a common enemy (i.e., Russia) with them.

Uganda is one of the poorest countries in the world but hosts one of the largest numbers of refugees worldwide, mostly fleeing from the civil war in South Sudan. Its open border policy is pursued by the authoritarian government of Yoweri Museveni, whose approach is inspired by a *Pan-African and anti-colonial identity construction and the pursuit of international prestige*. Uganda is defined as an African country that shares cultural and ethnic similarities with other African countries. Their borders are interpreted as artificial, dating back to the time of colonialism. In this way, the boundary of belonging is extended beyond the Ugandan nation-state, and refugees are included in the definition of the “we.” Like the discourse of the AKP government in Turkey, the term “brothers and sisters” is used to emphasize the commonalities between Ugandans and refugees. At the same time, the government also frames admitting refugees as a question of international recognition, based on the perception that Uganda’s international recognition depends, at least in part, on its policy of openness toward refugees. Arguably, this helps to offset international criticisms of its authoritarian political regime. Despite some specific criticisms, which refer to the depletion of natural resources by refugees, the government’s refugee policy is by and large supported by the opposition parties in the Ugandan parliament.

Venezuelans have been escaping the political instability and socioeconomic crisis that has intensified since 2017 under the Socialist regime of Nicolás Maduro, and *Chile* hosts one of the largest numbers of this displacement in Latin America. During right-wing President Sebastián Piñera’s tenure in Chile (which ended in 2022), he

pursued a rather ambivalent policy by presenting himself as an advocate of displaced Venezuelans but, at the same time, not granting them protection according to international refugee law and attempting to limit their numbers. The Chilean government's approach to displaced Venezuelans was based on different aspects of who "we" are that led to this ambivalent policy: a *sovereign nation and an economically successful anti-Socialist example*. On the one hand, the government's approach was motivated by an understanding of Chile as a socioeconomic model of the region and a systemic rival of Maduro's far-left Socialist regime in Venezuela. Accordingly, displaced Venezuelans were welcomed as political allies against a common enemy. On the other hand, the government emphasized national sovereignty and a limited willingness to comply with international refugee law. Accordingly, Venezuelans were not framed as "refugees" under international law but as "migrants" and evaluated in terms of their economic contribution to the Chilean economy. The left-wing opposition in Chile, in turn, was highly critical of the government's rhetorical commitment to displaced Venezuelans, considering it a political maneuver to delegitimize the left instead of a useful policy.

Finally, despite the massive displacement of the Rohingya from nearby Myanmar occurring in its neighborhood, *Singapore* rejects admitting any refugees—a policy it has pursued for decades and is a consensus between the government and the opposition. This stance is surprising, given that Singapore is a highly developed and diverse country with one of the largest shares of migrants in the world. The position of the Singaporean government is embedded in its project of *nation-building based on sovereignty, economic growth, and multiethnic balance*. First, Singapore's anti-refugee policy is legitimized by the principle of national self-determination; as a former colony, Singapore does not want interference in its affairs by international law or any international institutions. Second, Singapore sees itself in economic terms. Foreigners are seen from the standpoint of how much human capital and wealth they bring with them and to what extent their wealth and human capital might contribute to the prosperity of Singapore's core population. Refugees are seen as people who are likely to bring no gain to Singapore. Finally, the economic interpretation of migrants and refugees is complemented by a cultural framing. More migrants, especially those interpreted as economically "useless" like refugees, would threaten Singapore's cultural identity by upsetting the society's multiethnic balance.

4. Contribution to the literature

This book contributes to the literature in several ways. We argue that taking into account how national identities and refugees are framed can help account for empirical deviations from the theoretical expectations formulated by different strands of previous literature.

First, by showing how conceptions of national identity and the corresponding views of the "other" can shape countries' approaches to admitting refugees, we qualify

theoretical accounts that emphasize forces of cross-national cultural convergence toward what we have termed the “liberal script.” One of these accounts is associated with the world culture theory of the Stanford School of neo-institutionalism (e.g., Soysal 1994; see also Jacobson 1996). It describes the emergence of a worldwide liberal culture in the wake of World War II and its institutionalization through international organizations (Meyer et al. 1997; Meyer & Jepperson 2000; Elliott 2007). This emerging world culture conceptualizes the “individual” as a sacred actor endowed with inviolable rights, regardless of ethnic, racial, or national affiliation. These rights are codified in international documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that bind all nations of the world. Under international human rights law, the “refugee” is a figure particularly worthy of consideration, as their life and human rights are under threat. Accordingly, refugees are granted special protection and the right to seek asylum. Along with others, this principle of refugee protection has become a key component of world culture, which ought to be reflected in a liberal discourse on refugees and constrain the discretionary exercise of national sovereignty in migration policy. Even though Yasemin Soysal, in her landmark study on “post-national citizenship,” does not explicitly address the issue of refugee admissions, she does formulate, in passing, the expectation that “the introduction of expanding categories and definitions of rights of personhood sets the stage for new patterns of asylum, making national boundaries more permeable” (Soysal 1994: 158).

Christian Joppke (1999, 2005) comes to very similar conclusions, although he is not associated with the Stanford School. Much like Soysal, Joppke describes a trend toward increased strengthening of the individual rights of migrants, which can constrain national migration policies. In contrast to Soysal and the Stanford School, however, he emphasizes the role of domestic actors and the internal constitutional norms of liberal democracies rather than the role played by world culture and the diffusion of human rights norms through international organizations. Liberal democratic states limit themselves in exercising national sovereignty through constitutional norms that protect individual rights. These protections have been strengthened over time by national courts and domestic civil rights organizations (for similar arguments, see Hollifield 1992; Guiraudon 1998).¹⁰

These accounts lead to a similar assumption that the way admitting refugees is framed in different countries is shaped by adherence to or rejection of the principles

¹⁰ Some comparative studies on migration policy have attempted to test whether these policies have converged and become more liberal over time (e.g., Helbling & Kalkum 2018; de Haas et al. 2018; Blair et al. 2021). They show that, over the last decades, asylum policies have tended to become more *liberal* in terms of *entry* policies (e.g., regarding eligibility requirements and conditions of entry) but more *restrictive* regarding border *control* policies to curb irregular access (e.g., by “externalizing” border controls). They also observe a cross-national *convergence* of migration policies across countries, at least within OECD countries (Helbling & Kalkum 2018). However, despite this convergence, refugee admission policies between countries continue to vary considerably, particularly when we compare actual responses to refugee inflows and not only policies “on paper”. In a systematic review of the literature on refugee governance in six countries, Brumat et al. (2022) suggest that most studies find a localization of refugee policies (instead of a convergence around global standards and norms) that are mostly oriented toward the containment of refugee movements.

of the “liberal script.” One would expect liberal societies to frame the refugee issue as more of a human rights issue and, therefore, be more open to accepting refugees than nonliberal societies. Even though our study does not provide quantitative data to test these assumptions more systematically, our qualitative analyses identify anomalies that do not conform to these expectations. First, Uganda and Turkey are among the least liberal and democratic countries in our study, but these governments pursue a rather open approach to admitting refugees. Second, even among the liberal democracies in our sample, willingness to admit refugees is not necessarily shaped by references to liberal values and international law. In Chile, for example, the willingness to admit displaced Venezuelans was shaped far more by the government’s wish to send a strong signal of opposition to the Socialist regime in Venezuela rather than by the country’s obligations under the Cartagena Declaration on refugees. Thus, we argue that to understand what drives politicians’ stances on refugee admissions in each country, a context-specific understanding of how national identity and refugees are understood is necessary.

A second strand of the literature also emphasizes forces of cross-national convergence but in another direction. These authors argue that, across countries, refugees tend to be constructed as a “threat” to the nation and that there is, thus, a move toward more restrictive migration policies. This perspective is primarily associated with “securitization theory,” which has examined how migration has increasingly been associated with concerns over national security and the rule of law (Buzan et al. 1998; Huysmans 2006; Hammerstadt 2014). Securitization is conceptualized as a discursive strategy. But scholars argue that discourse has tangible consequences for policy, as states worldwide have imposed more restrictive measures at the expense of migrants and refugees and their rights. For example, states have reacted by fortifying their borders and by adopting a wide variety of techniques by which they attempt to eschew the “spirit” of international refugee protection and limit refugees’ ability to reach the territory of a state where they can apply for asylum (FitzGerald 2019; Shachar 2020; Mau 2021). Some authors argue that liberal democracies, in particular—that officially advocate the protection of refugees—pursue a policy of securitization, a phenomenon that has been described by James F. Hollifield (2004) and Thomas Faist (2018) as the “liberal paradox.”

In a similar vein, Beth Simmons and colleagues have recently proposed the concepts of “border orientation” (Simmons & Kenwick 2022) and “border anxiety” (Simmons & Shaffer 2019) to capture this trend. Whereas the first concept describes the extent to which a state controls the entry and exit at its national borders, the latter refers to the negative sentiments that have become associated with cross-border movements. Simmons et al. demonstrate that anxiety has become a more common feature of the discourse on borders over time and has spread globally. In addition, the authors show that there has been a significant increase in governmental border control measures over the past twenty years.

We do not dispute the merits of these accounts; however, our in-depth analysis suggests that there continues to be significant cross-national variation (also among liberal democracies) that is not fully captured by referring to processes of

securitization or cross-nationally shared anxiety over borders. First, framing refugees as a security threat is only one interpretation among many others, and, in some countries, the security frame does not matter at all. Second, securitization theory may explain responses to refugee movements by some states very well, such as Poland's refusal to admit any Syrian refugees via the EU relocation mechanism, while failing to account for other countries' responses, such as Turkey and Germany, which contrary to Poland, have shown solidarity with Syrian refugees. Third, the perspective cannot make sense of why the same receiving state securitizes one kind of refugee movement and not others, as has occurred in Poland with Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. And finally, there are important differences between political parties within countries in the extent to which they securitize refugees. Thus, we argue that to understand countries' different approaches to admitting refugees, it is important to analyze how they frame the issue.

Third, our study is evidently not the first qualitative analysis of public discourse about refugees. There is already a large body of qualitative discourse analyses of refugees, some related to the countries in our study (e.g., [Krzyżanowski 2018](#) on Poland, [Polat 2018](#) on Turkey, [Vollmer & Karakayali 2018](#) on Germany). Without question, these studies provide in-depth insight into each country, which we refer to and build on in our country analyses. However, most qualitative analyses focus only on one country and, within that country, usually on only one actor. This narrow perspective is due to the epistemological foundation of most qualitative studies. They focus on a “thick description” ([Geertz 1973](#)) of single cases but are less interested in comparing different countries or actors and theorizing similarities and differences between them. In contrast, our cross-national comparison can identify differences and similarities between cases and try to account for them.¹¹ We show that governments and opposition parties in the six countries of our study make very different use of the frames described above in Section 2. In addition, while similar frames can be used across countries, we demonstrate that their specific content and meaning remain context-dependent, as they are shaped by different cultural repertoires.

Furthermore, a large share of discourse analyses on refugees is dominated by the “critical discourse analysis” methodological perspective (often used in combination with securitization theory). Critical discourse analysis stands in the tradition of a critical theory of society. Its aim is explicitly normative, namely “demystifying the—manifest or latent—persuasive or ‘manipulative’ character of discursive practices” ([Reisigl & Wodak 2016](#): 88). In consequence, critical discourse analysis mainly seeks to demonstrate how racism and nationalism shape the discourse on refugees and how refugees are stigmatized and marginalized ([Reisigl & Wodak 2001](#); [Wodak 2015](#); [Krzyżanowski 2020](#)). Research has particularly focused on how the rise of new

¹¹ Exemplary in this regard are such comparative studies as Michèle [Lamont et al. \(2016\)](#), who draw on the notion of cultural repertoires to explain minority groups' variable responses to stigmatization in Brazil, the US, and Israel; or Myra Marx [Ferree et al. \(2002\)](#) who compare public discourse on abortion in the US and Germany; or Juan [Díez Medrano \(2003\)](#), who compares people's national identity constructions in three countries (Germany, Spain, and the UK) to explain support for the EU.

right-wing parties across Europe (like the Austrian Freedom Party in Austria or the Front National in France) has promoted racist discourse about migrants and asylum seekers.

Without denying that security concerns and racism may shape public discourse on refugees in important ways, our findings suggest that this is not the full story. We argue that the normative orientation of critical discourse analysis sometimes leads to a biased characterization of public discourse. For example, while these approaches seem to capture the character of the political discourse on admitting refugees to Poland very well, where refugees from the Middle East were frequently constructed as a terrorist and cultural threat, they are less suitable for understanding more inclusive discourse on refugees that we observe in other countries, such as Uganda and Turkey. Hence, in our study, we adopt a normatively more neutral approach to capture the full spectrum of how refugees are framed and to understand why a refugee group might be interpreted positively in some countries and negatively in others.

Fourth, our analysis complements existing explanatory accounts of refugee admission policies that focus on country differences (e.g., [Jacobsen 1996](#); [Abdelaaty 2021](#); [Blair et al. 2021](#); [Boucher & Gest 2018](#)) by highlighting the importance of framing. This literature has identified a number of variables and developed various hypotheses on how these variables shape national admission policies. For example, in her excellent book, Lamis Elmy [Abdelaaty \(2021\)](#) argues that countries are more likely to accept refugees who are ethnically similar to the native population. Without this similarity, the probability of rejection is high. A second hypothesis, also pointed out by [Abdelaaty](#), refers to international relations between the country from which refugees come and the recipient country. If people flee from a country with which the receiving country has a rather hostile relationship, the likelihood that the refugees will be accepted is much higher because this act is used as a foreign policy instrument to delegitimize the opponent regime ([Abdelaaty 2021](#)). [Aristide Zolberg, Astri Suhrke, and Sergio Aguayo \(1989\)](#) resort to this hypothesis to explain why the United States was willing to accept asylum-seekers from communist Cuba but not from Haiti. Third, other studies have emphasized that a country's willingness to accept refugees depends on economic parameters. Admitting refugees is assumed to be more likely if it does not strain a country's labor market and welfare state. In contrast, [Frida Boräng \(2015\)](#) suggests that welfare state institutions may lead to more open refugee admission policies because of the institutionalization of solidarity norms.¹²

We do not deny that the variables identified by this literature play an important role in explaining countries' different refugee policies. However, our analysis shows that different actors within a country can frame these issues in very different ways, suggesting that a process of interpretation mediates the impact of these variables on a country's refugee policy. We link this perspective to the famous Thomas theorem formulated in 1928 by [William I. Thomas and Dorothy S. Thomas](#)

¹² National contextual factors are important not only to understanding refugee admission policies but also refugee integration, as [Heba Gowayed \(2022\)](#) shows in her recent book, which is based on interviews with Syrian refugees in Canada, Germany, and the US.

that reads, “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas 1928: 572).¹³ Take, for instance, [Abdelaaty’s \(2021\)](#) claim that ethnic similarity between the refugees and the host society leads to more open admission policies: What constitutes ethnic and cultural similarity essentially depends on how political actors define the host community and the refugees.

Picking up the example of Turkey, President Erdoğan emphasizes Turkey’s Islamic heritage as a defining feature of its collective identity, in contrast to the secularist self-understanding of the Turkish Republic. In consequence, he defines Syrian refugees of the Muslim faith as culturally close and thereby justifies granting them protection. Furthermore, Erdoğan does not discursively differentiate between Sunni Arab and Kurdish refugees from Syria, despite the ethnic tensions between Kurds and Turks. In contrast, the political opposition tends to uphold a Turkish national identity and draws a boundary with regard to Syrians as “Arabs,” rejecting the admission of Syrian refugees.

Another example is the difference between Germany and Poland in framing Syrian refugees. While in the German discourse, the predominantly Muslim origin of the refugees only played a minor role, the Polish PiS government emphasized precisely the religious otherness of Syrians to legitimize their rejection. The multiplicity of categorizations testifies to the importance of framing the variable of cultural closeness or ethnic similarity. Framing is similarly relevant for other variables that have been shown to shape admission policies, such as the economic conditions in the host country or its international obligations.

Finally, our study not only analyzes cross-national differences in how the question of refugee admissions is framed but also looks at differences within countries between different political parties. Our findings qualify a recently emerging account in political science that argues that the migration policy positions of political parties are driven by a new cleavage between so-called “cosmopolitans” and “communitarians” ([de Wilde et al. 2019](#); see also [Kriesi et al. 2022](#); [Kriesi et al. 2012](#); [Hooghe & Marks 2018](#)). This cleavage is said to be emerging in many countries because of the shifting values of some parts of the population toward more liberal values and processes of globalization that challenge national borders. Cosmopolitans advocate open borders and are in favor of migration and cultural diversity, while communitarians defend border closure, tend to reject migration, and advocate cultural homogeneity. These two camps are represented by new-left and liberal parties on one side and right-wing populist parties on the other.

Our analyses suggest that this diagnosis of a cosmopolitan–communitarian cleavage can help to account for differences between the refugee policy positions and

¹³ Andrew [Geddes \(2021\)](#) recently coined the term “migration governance repertoires” to express a similar intuition: That migration policies are shaped by policymakers’ sense-making activities and the cognitive and normative schemata they draw upon in this process. Policymakers act more on “representations of facts” than on the “facts” themselves. Although we share Geddes’ basic assumptions, we differ from his approach in two respects. While he analyzes sense-making and deliberation within organizational settings, we look at public discourse. We also place national identity constructions and images of “otherness” in the foreground as guideposts for policymaking.

framings of political parties in some countries very well but fail to do so in others. For example, the cleavage theory helps understand the highly polarized political discourse in Poland, which is divided between the populist right-wing PiS party that rejects admitting refugees on communitarian grounds, and the centrist Civic Coalition that adopts a more cosmopolitan discourse and favors the admission of (some) refugees. However, the theory of a cosmopolitan–communitarian divide fails to explain the policy positions of political parties in other countries. For example, Turkey’s ruling right-wing populist AKP does not fit into the theoretically expected picture, as the party supports admitting refugees. In Chile, the reaction to the Venezuelan displacement crisis is embedded in a left–right cleavage still marked by the legacy of the military dictatorship of Pinochet. Thus, we claim that it is necessary to consider the specific cleavage constellation in a country to properly understand within-country differences in how refugees are framed.

5. Methodological decisions and resulting limitations

Before moving on, we would like to discuss some methodological and sampling choices, which lead to several caveats.

The first issue concerns our sample. As described in more detail in Chapter 3, we selected country cases based on an *exploratory* logic to explore the variety of possible frames mobilized in debates on admitting refugees. In consequence, the countries of our study vary along several dimensions: (1) All six countries in our analysis are affected by the various refugee crises, but they respond with different policies, ranging from very open (Uganda) to completely closed (Singapore); (2) We included liberal democracies (Germany, Chile, and Poland, whose level of liberal democracy declined during our period of analysis) and semi-authoritarian regimes (Singapore, Turkey, and Uganda) in order to gauge to what extent refugee admission policies are shaped by the adherence to liberal values and the liberal script; (3) The cases also vary in other ways, such as the level of development, from high-income (Germany and Singapore) to low-income countries (Uganda), and the cultural and geographic proximity to the refugees.

Given that our study covers only six countries and the six cases vary along many dimensions, we cannot derive any causal claims about the variables that impact a country’s refugee policy that are generalizable beyond the cases in our study. However, due to the fact that we have covered such a variety of cases, we suspect that two findings of our study can be generalized beyond the cases we studied. The first is that political actors’ interpretation of a country’s collective identity on the one hand and refugees on the other is central to understanding their broader policy preferences regarding admitting or rejecting refugees. We show that this relationship holds across our country cases, despite the different context conditions. Second, we have developed a typology of six different frames political actors use to interpret the collective identity of their country and refugees, which we present in more detail in Chapter 2. We posit that this typology can also be used to classify political discourse

on admitting refugees in other countries, given that it was developed based on such a diverse set of cases. However, which *specific frames* and *substantive characterizations* of the features of national identity and refugees a government or political party uses varies across countries and depends on the country-specific cultural repertoires, and thus, cannot be generalized.

Second, we focus our analysis on the *general policy preferences* (and their supporting frames) articulated by political actors about whether refugees are welcome in a country and should be accepted. We neither focus on the number of refugees a country has taken in, which often depends on its proximity to a crisis area, nor the specific policy outcome. Specific and enacted policies are the result of a complex political process, which involves bargaining between and within political parties, the government and state administration, lobbying by interest groups, judicial review, constraints imposed by international treaties, public opinion dynamics, and other factors.¹⁴ In our study, instead of focusing on this policymaking process, we look at the broader policy preferences of governments and political parties as revealed in parliamentary debates. Even though we cannot systematically trace the impact of these more general policy preferences on the ultimate policy outcome, we assume a rather close connection between the stated policy preferences of the government and governing parties and the policy outcome for two reasons. First, the governing majority is typically not dependent on approval by opposition parties to enact its policy preferences. Second, one can assume that the policy preferences revealed in public debates already factor in or anticipate political bargaining, lobby group influence, judicial constraints, and other policymaking processes. Government actors especially must expect that their performance will ultimately be measured by what they have said in public, which is why we expect them to strive for some degree of consistency. Indeed, our analyses do not find a large gap between the refugee policies proposed by the governing parties and those ultimately enacted.

More specifically, it should be noted that we focus mostly on policy preferences and frames articulated in parliamentary debates (though we include statements made outside the parliamentary forum and party manifestos in some cases as well). As we describe in more detail in Chapter 3, parliamentary debates are a good source to cover the different policy proposals of a country's most important political parties and how they are framed. These debates represent the most politically influential voices of a society but exclude minor political parties and civil society actors. Thus, our analysis does not cover all opinions represented in society but rather those most relevant to policymaking. Nevertheless, one can assume that parliamentary debates also pick up and are shaped by the larger public discourse and, thus, by actors from civil society as well, since the parties represented in parliament seek to broaden their appeal to ensure re-election.

¹⁴ The literature on migration policy has pointed out that there is often a "discursive gap" between what politicians say in public and the policies they enact on paper (Czaika & de Haas 2013). In Western Europe and the US, politicians' discourse about migration are frequently more restrictive than their policies. The reason is that they need to cater to the population's generally more anti-immigrant sentiment while being influenced by lobby groups or honoring international legal obligations that require a more liberal policy.

The third issue concerns the relationship between *frames and cultural repertoires* on the one hand and *policy positions* or preferences on the other. We assume that these two constructs are distinct and that the framing of an issue shapes a political actor's policy preference on that issue. We argue that by analyzing how political actors interpret the world, we can understand why they prefer one avenue of action over another. As described in more detail in Chapter 2, frames can shape preferences because they selectively focus attention on certain aspects of reality (e.g., actors may focus their attention on the criminality rate of refugees or their humanitarian plight), and they connect a specific issue to broader normative beliefs (e.g., the value of national sovereignty or respect for human rights) or, as we argue in this study, to certain constructions of national identity. We do not assume that frames "cause" political preferences but rather that they enable and constrain them by defining what is conceivable and legitimate. Taking up Max Weber's metaphor of the switchman, we argue that frames and the cultural repertoires behind them "determine the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest" (Weber 1988: 252). By analyzing frames, we thus aim at what Max Weber (1978) has called an "interpretive understanding" (*"deutendes Verstehen"*) of social action.

This assumption, of course, raises the question of the *strategic use* of framing. There might be a mismatch between what politicians communicate in public and the reasons that actually motivate their policy positions "behind closed doors." In their public communication, politicians may use frames strategically to gain support for a policy, and they may change their framing of an issue when they believe that other frames are better suited to achieve their policies. For instance, Turkish President Erdoğan is often accused of a hypocritical discourse on Syrian refugees. While adopting humanitarian language toward them in his public statements, his detractors claim that his real intention in admitting refugees is to expand Turkey's sphere of influence in the Middle East and blackmail the EU. If this is the case, the relationship between publicly articulated frames and policy preferences is arbitrary. Indeed, we agree that it is important to distinguish between a "frontstage" of what politicians say and a "backstage" of what their "true" intentions are (to borrow Erving Goffman's terminology). Our discourse analysis only covers the frontstage—public communication—though we have some insight into the backstage through our expert interviews.

However, we argue that politicians are not completely free to choose a frame because they are constrained by their party's ideology and the country's political culture. Our empirical analyses show that the government and opposition parties typically have an ideological consistency that changes little over time, indicating that frames are rather stable patterns of interpretation. Furthermore, publicly communicated frames create a discursive reality "*sui generis*" that can put politicians under pressure to bring their actions in line with what they say in public. The thesis that frames cannot be changed at random and can only be used strategically to a limited extent is also plausible from a theoretical point of view. Following Anthony Downs' (1957) economic theory of democracy, ideological party profiles are oriented to a

certain segment of potential voters. If a party changes the framing of a particular issue in such a way that the new framing does not match the party's ideology, it is likely to lose those voters who are targeted by the party's specific profile. This mechanism makes it likely that political actors will change their framing only to a limited extent. The inflexibility of political parties can lead to the emergence of new parties that focus on political issues that existing parties do not address for ideological reasons (Hooghe & Marks 2018). This logic does not mean that parties cannot change their positions at all. However, the political actors' frames define the corridors in which such changes can take place.

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2

Conceptual framework

1. Framing the “we” and the “others” as key components of public discourse on admitting refugees

Refugees are people who have had to leave their country due to persecution, seeking refuge in another state. For the host country, refugees typically have not previously belonged to the society; in this respect, refugees are the “others.”¹ Admitting refugees implies opening the boundaries of the “imagined community” (Anderson 2016) of the nation and sharing resources—at least temporarily—with those who claim to need protection. This implication triggers a public reflection about who “we” are, that is, how a society sees itself and to what extent “we” have the obligation, capacity, and interest to help. It also raises the question of who “they” are, for example, in terms of their neediness, cultural background, skills, and resources, and to what extent they fit “us” and are worthy of help. We argue that the answers given to these two questions help us better understand a country’s refugee policy and the differences between political parties within countries.

The observation that the interaction with “others” triggers the question of the identity of a group or a society has been theorized in many different ways, ranging from social psychology to cultural and postcolonial studies. For instance, Henri Tajfel (Tajfel et al. 1971), one of the founders of social identity theory in social psychology, argues that social interactions with the members of an out-group set in motion a cognitive process increasing the salience of an in-group identity, even if the others differ from the in-group only by an arbitrary and minimal characteristic. This cognitive process is due to individuals’ tendency to strive for a “positive distinctiveness” in terms of their social identity.

In a similar vein, cultural and postcolonial studies have critically examined discursive processes of “othering,” which refers to the construction and delimitation of an in-group identity by defining an out-group. For example, Edward S. Said (1978), in his influential study on “Orientalism,” shows how the “West” has discursively constructed the “Orient” as its “other,” thereby affirming its own self-image as a superior civilization. Similarly, Stuart Hall (1992) argues that the identity of the “West” emerged when European powers came into contact with other cultures in the course of colonization and subsequently developed what Hall calls the hierarchical idea of “the West and the rest.” We tie our research to this general theoretical perspective but

¹ This is not always the case. Consider, for example, ethnic Germans being forced to emigrate to Western Germany after World War II.

take a more neutral stance. While theorists of the process of “othering” assume that it leads to a devaluation of the other, we show that refugees as “others” are sometimes also portrayed in a positive light depending on the specific frames of interpretation.

The idea that processes of identity construction are closely related to encounters with the “other” has also been taken up in research on immigration policy and discourse. In Rogers Brubaker’s (1992) seminal study on the immigration and citizenship policies of Germany and France, he argues that these policies are shaped by different conceptions of nationhood (particularly ethnic and civic nationalism) formed from these countries’ historical experiences with ethnic minorities. Anna Triandafyllidou (2001) argues that immigration processes often set off a discursive process in the receiving country of redefining national identity in such a way as to exclude the immigrant “other” from the national community. More recently, studying the discourse of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Kerem Morgül (2022) has also pointed to the role played by understandings of national identity for how refugees as “others” are perceived.

Historians have argued that societies’ engagement with the “other,” and immigrants in particular, is even constitutive for nation-building processes. For example, examining the development of German nationalism in the imperial period from the late nineteenth century to World War I, global historian Sebastian Conrad demonstrates that German identity and nationalism were shaped by the colonial engagements and increasing global interconnectedness of the German Empire, as well as through experiences of increasing geographic mobility and labor immigration. Germany’s collective identity construction and national self-understanding, Conrad argues, can only be understood “as the product and effect of interactions, exchanges, and circulation within an increasingly interconnected world” (Conrad 2006: 20; own translation).

Finally, quantitative research on public attitudes toward immigrants has also highlighted the importance of national identity constructions and images of the “other.” According to a literature review by Hainmüller and Hopkins (2014), public attitudes toward immigrants are significantly shaped by “sociotropic concerns” regarding their impact on the nation. This finding means that anti-immigrant attitudes, in particular, are driven by perceived symbolic threats of immigrants on the culture and economic well-being of the receiving country rather than by their actual impact on the personal material situation of natives. Wesley Hiers, Thomas Soehl, and Andreas Wimmer (2017) point out the importance of national history in this discussion. They demonstrate that countries that have experienced a national trauma in the past (violent conflicts or loss of territory and sovereignty) develop ethnic (rather than civic) forms of nationalism and show higher levels of anti-immigration attitudes (see also Soehl & Karim 2021).

Drawing inspiration from these studies, we argue that much like the case of migration more generally, admitting refugees triggers a public reflection about who “we” are, who those who claim to be refugees are, and whether they fit “us” or deserve “our” help. We demonstrate that political actors’ position on whether a country should accept refugees is related to how they define the characteristics of the host society’s

identity and the refugees. As described in more detail in this chapter, we claim that six different dimensions of defining “us” and the “others” are relevant to the question of refugee admission: not only cultural and economic characteristics, as well as security concerns, which have been frequently highlighted in the literature on the reception of migrants, but also moral and legal obligations and international relations.

We focus on the *public sphere* as the site where the definition of a country’s identity and the interpretations of refugees are negotiated (Habermas 1974, 1989). The public sphere is structured into different public forums, which include town hall meetings, protests, internet platforms, and mass media, such as radio, television, and newspapers (Gerhards & Neidhardt 1990; Ferree et al. 2002). These forums also include national parliaments, where political matters are discussed and where we concentrate our empirical analysis for reasons explained further in Section 2.2 of Chapter 3. While Jürgen Habermas assumes that the discourse in the public sphere takes the form of rational argumentation, reality often seems to be different: public discourse rather resembles a “contest over meaning” (Ferree et al. 2002: 5). Instead of justifying their policy positions with reasoned and well-balanced arguments and letting themselves be convinced by the “unforced force of the better argument” (Habermas 1996: 103), political actors tend to push their position by *framing* the issue in a specific way and appealing to narratives and imagery to produce “cultural resonance” with the public and their respective constituencies (Snow & Benford 1988). By using frames in public discourse, politicians offer a way to make sense of a political issue, express their policy ideas, and justify policies to convince the public and gain popular support.²

There is a large body of social science literature using the concept of “framing,” mainly in the fields of social movement and media studies, as well as social psychology, which we do not review in detail here (for many others, see Snow & Benford 1988; Entman 1993; Gerhards 1995; Scheufele 1999; Snow 2013). Suffice it to say that “frames” can be understood as schemata of interpretation through which social actors view the world. Much like a picture frame, frames select a part of reality and highlight what is important about an issue in contrast to what can be ignored (Ferree et al. 2002). Thus, framing is an essential aspect of political communication, as it justifies a certain policy position and mobilizes support.

We distinguish conceptually between *frames*, the *objects* to which frames refer, and *cultural repertoires* that actors draw upon to fill frames with specific content and meaning. First, regarding *frames*, we distinguish between six different frames that are relevant for public discourse on admitting refugees: cultural, economic, moral, legal, security-related, or international frames. We explain the six frames in more detail in a moment. One can think of the six frames as different colors used to paint a picture. The chosen color does not yet say anything about what is being painted and

² By emphasizing the specific importance of frames in public discourse, we link our study to the general theoretical perspective of “discursive institutionalism.” As Vivien Schmidt has pointed out (2008; 2015), discursive institutionalism is an umbrella term that encompasses very different research directions. But they all share the notion that ideas and discourse play a key role in politics because they provide ideational frameworks to make sense of and justify political issues and construct avenues of action.

how it is being depicted. Second, we argue that the six frames refer to two *framing objects*: the host society and its characteristics on the one hand and the refugees as “others” on the other. In other words, the host nation, as well as the refugees, can be framed in cultural, economic, moral, legal, security-related, or international terms—or, taking up the earlier metaphor, depicted in six different colors. These different frames are, *prima facie*, not content-specific but neutral on certain policy positions. Thus, political actors can fill the characterization of the host society and the refugees with various meanings. For example, the host nation can be framed in cultural terms as culturally homogenous and unable to admit foreigners or as multicultural and open toward refugees from different backgrounds. Likewise, the refugees can be framed as culturally alien or culturally close, each of which suggests different policy conclusions.

It should be noted that framing the “we” and the “others” are not independent acts but related to each other. A certain definition of the “we” structures the way the “refugees” are perceived. For instance, if political actors emphasize the ethnic homogeneity of the host nation, then it is likely that refugees are going to be evaluated in these terms as well, that is, as ethnically close or distant. And if the economic situation of the receiving country is highlighted, then refugees are most likely evaluated in terms of their human capital.

The content of politicians’ frames is not plucked out of thin air. They are embedded in the political culture of a country and the ideological orientation of their respective party. In filling each frame with meaning, politicians draw on different “*cultural repertoires*” (Lamont & Thévenot 2000). There are several kin concepts used in the literature, such as “cultural themes” (Gamson 1992; Díez Medrano 2003) or “cultural tool kits” (Swidler 1986), that have a similar meaning. They refer to the shared cultural elements like ideologies, narratives, collective memories, and symbols that form the repertoire used by a social group to make sense of the world and determine avenues of action. For example, in a comparative study on the public discourse on abortion in Germany and the US, Ferree et al. (2002) have shown that discourse participants appeal to beliefs anchored in both countries’ cultural repertoire to support their position: This is the idea of women’s self-determination in the United States, and the idea that the state has a duty to protect unborn life in Germany, a lesson deriving from the country’s Nazi past. Juan Díez Medrano (2003) has demonstrated how elites in Germany, Spain, and the UK draw on different national cultural repertoires to frame their support for (or criticism of) the EU. While in Germany, the memory of the Nazi past is a relevant source of support for the EU, in the UK, Euroscepticism is embedded in the memory of the Empire. In our study, we find that the content of the frames politicians use are built on narratives such as these as well, which vary between countries and political groups within countries.³ These cultural repertoires that actors draw upon to fill the frames with content relate primarily to the definition of the collective identity; however, because framing the

³ When applied to political parties and their constituencies, “cultural repertoires” refer to more than a political program or ideology. They also encompass party-specific narratives, memories, and beliefs.

“we” informs framing refugees, the cultural repertoires also indirectly influence the characterization of the refugees.

To be clear, we do not assume that cultural repertoires work like “cultural programs” that fully determine how politicians view the world and cause political action. We reason that the cultural repertoires of a constituency are often not specific and inconsistent, leaving some maneuvering room for politicians to draw upon them strategically. Also, the cultural repertoires of different groups are not mutually exclusive, as they partly overlap. However, we argue that they provide, metaphorically speaking, “guardrails” for how politicians of different countries and political parties can approach the question of refugee admissions. They shape what is taken for granted and what approach can be viewed as legitimate within certain contexts, as it must stay consistent with the party ideology and resonate within the political culture of a country. For example, given Turkey’s Ottoman history and Islamic heritage, a discourse of historical and religious solidarity between Turks and Syrian refugees is a likely option for President Erdoğan, who has been attempting to rebuild Turkish society along Islamic lines and recover its Ottoman past. Citing Weber again, cultural repertoires can shape the “tracks” along which the policymaking process is pushed forward.⁴

In sum, we claim that the collective identity and characteristics of the host nation, as well as the identities and characteristics of refugees, can be framed in six different ways and that political actors fill these frames with specific content by drawing on the cultural repertoires available to them, which vary by country and political constituency within a country.

The different ways to frame the “we” and the “refugees” presented in this book result from both an inductive and deductive research process. On the one hand, as is described in more detail in Chapter 3, where we detail our methodological approach, we have inductively analyzed a large number of parliamentary debates and political statements on admitting refugees and reconstructed the recurrent frames that structure the debate. On the other hand, we have revised the pertinent literature on the different factors that can shape a country’s refugee policy, such as the level of economic development, the cultural closeness of refugees to the host population, or considerations of international politics. Whereas the literature typically treats these factors as objectively given, we argue that they become relevant only if they are emphasized and framed by political actors in a particular way. For instance, as previously discussed, the literature has highlighted that the extent to which the refugees “fit” the host population in cultural or ethnic terms can influence their chances of receiving asylum (Blair et al. 2020; Abdelaaty 2021). But cultural fit is a matter of interpretation. It only becomes meaningful when political actors actually frame the “we” and the refugees in cultural or ethnic terms as compatible or incompatible.

⁴ It should be noted that, methodologically, we do not provide an independent “measurement” of the cultural repertoires of each society and political party in our study. Rather, we infer them from the parliamentary debates and speeches we analyzed.

1.1 Who are “we”? Framing the host nation

Both national identity and refugees can be interpreted through six different frames.

One way to frame the “we” that can shape debates on admitting refugees refers to its *economic* characteristics, which cover factors such as the level of economic development of a country, the domestic labor market capacity, and the performance of the national welfare state. John W. Meyer and his colleagues (1997) argue that such economic parameters have become central to the modern conception of nationhood, as nation-states typically come to define their goals in terms of collective welfare and development. The question of admitting refugees can trigger these economic aspects of national self-understanding for different reasons. On the one hand, it involves spending resources for their shelter and provision, which may burden welfare institutions. On the other hand, admitting refugees also means gaining additional labor power, should refugees receive work permits, which can, in turn, either top up labor market needs or raise concerns about increased labor market competition.

Whether the economic situation of a country impacts its openness toward receiving refugees has been widely discussed in the extant literature. Some scholars suggest that refugee admission policies tend to be more restrictive in highly developed countries⁵ because governments seek to protect the domestic labor market, especially from low-skilled competition, and because refugees are perceived to be a burden on welfare spending (e.g., [Huysmans 2006](#); [Geddes 2003](#); [Hollifield et al. 2014](#)). In fact, most of the world’s refugees are hosted in less developed countries. Economic reasons may also compel less developed countries to be more open to receiving refugees ([Tsourapas 2019](#); [Adamson & Tsourapas 2020](#); [Blair et al. 2020](#)). One reason could be that they need to top up their domestic labor market with additional human resources. Another reason is that less developed countries may expect to receive international financial aid in return for hosting refugees.

In our study, we show that the economic characteristics of the host society do not matter per se but depend on how they are interpreted in public discourse. Political representatives fill the economic frame with different content by drawing upon different cultural repertoires. For example, in contrast to the general trend, Germany, a highly developed country, is among the top hosts of refugees in the world. To justify admitting hundreds of thousands of refugees, especially from Syria, Chancellor Merkel appealed to the country’s economic prowess (“we can do it”)—a key narrative of Germany’s postwar self-understanding. In direct contrast, the government of Singapore appeals to its limited resources and land as a small city-state to reject refugees, even though it is one of the most highly developed countries in the world.

A second way to frame the collective identity of a society vis-à-vis refugees is in *cultural* terms that refer to the (real or imagined) history of a nation and its ethnic composition and cultural characteristics. There are many ways to imagine the

⁵ At least in rhetoric, not always in outcome ([Hollifield 2004](#)).

culture of a nation: as a population sharing a common ethnic descent, language, religion, cultural traditions, way of life, or certain values. Typically, scholars distinguish between more exclusive, ethnocultural forms of nationalism, which define the nation as a community of descent with a shared history, culture, and language, and more inclusive, civic forms of nationalism based on a shared allegiance to the state that can include groups of different ethnic origins who maintain their own cultural identities.

Extant literature argues that different conceptions of nationhood can lead to different migration policies. For example, in his classic study, Rogers Brubaker (1992) shows how historical conceptions (or “cultural idioms”) of nationhood have shaped naturalization and migrant integration policies in Germany and France. Germany’s ethnocultural conception of nationhood, based on the notion of common descent and shared culture, has generated a migration policy open to co-ethnics but closed to migrants defined as ethnic others.⁶ In contrast, France’s political and territorial conception of nationhood has led to de-emphasizing migrants’ ethnic origins and has generated a policy of assimilation.⁷ In a similar vein, Adrian Favell (1998) reconstructs different public “philosophies of integration” toward migrants and ethnic minorities in France and the UK, which are related to different publicly shared and historically evolved conceptions about what “glues” a society together.

In line with this literature, we assume that the different repertoires political actors use to define the cultural characteristics of host societies matter because they shape asylum policies.⁸ However, the decisive factor is which of the different cultural characteristics of the repertoire are picked and emphasized. Very often, a country’s cultural identity is defined with reference to the country’s history, a process described in the literature as an “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). For example, political parties in Poland define Polish identity in very different ways to justify their asylum policy preferences. Liberal actors draw on the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to highlight Poland’s allegedly multicultural and religiously tolerant past, which should predispose it to a more welcoming stance toward Muslim refugees from Syria. In contrast, right-wing politicians mobilize the myth of Poland as a “bulwark of Christianity,” that is, its historical role as part of the Holy Alliance in fighting the advancement of the Ottomans. Drawing on this myth, these politicians justify closing the borders to Muslim refugees seeking asylum in Europe because these refugees allegedly endanger Poland’s Christian heritage. Our sample also has a counterintuitive case where framing the national self in multicultural terms supports an anti-refugee policy. The government of Singapore, a proudly

⁶ It must be noted that since the publication of Brubaker’s study, German nationality law has changed significantly, reflecting an evolving conception of nationhood (Joppke 1999).

⁷ In a similar vein, it is frequently hypothesized that former settler colonies or imperial powers with a multicultural population develop more open immigration policies than ethnically and culturally homogeneous states because of their self-understanding as a country of immigration and many cultures (Hollifield et al. 2014; Boucher & Gest 2015, 2018).

⁸ While this strand of literature has mostly dealt with how different cultural conceptions of nationhood can shape migrant integration policies, we believe that it bears lessons for understanding different approaches to admitting refugees as well.

multicultural city-state that is constituted of a heterogeneous population of Chinese, Malay, and Indian descent, rejects the admission of Muslim Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, among other reasons, out of fear of destabilizing its carefully managed ethnic balance.

A third way to frame the collective self of a nation-state that can be triggered by admitting refugees is its *moral* character and the values that define it. Refugees are persons in need who seek help from others. This frame can raise fundamental moral questions about what is owed to strangers in need, touching upon the core values that define the host community. In the field of social justice research, scholars have coined the term “moral repertoires” to describe collectively shared ideas about the just distribution of resources and burdens in society or who should get what and why (Heuer et al. 2020). We show that politicians often link the question of admitting or rejecting refugees to such moral repertoires, which, in turn, depend on the values regarded as constitutive for a society. These values can include, for example, appeals to humanitarian principles or religious values such as Christian charity or Islamic hospitality. Some authors have argued that previous experiences of forced displacement among the host population with the corresponding feelings of vulnerability and norms of reciprocity can shape preferences in favor of more welcoming asylum policies (Jacobsen 1996). Boräng (2015), in turn, argues that norms of solidarity institutionalized in welfare states can lead to more generous asylum policies.

We argue that which moral repertoires and which underlying values are emphasized to define the national identity of a country is decisive for a country’s refugee policy. In some cases, political actors refer to religion to define those values that shape the moral character of their nation. For instance, Kaczyński, the leader of the Polish right-wing PiS party, calls on Poland’s Christian heritage, but surprisingly not to promote helping refugees in the name of Christian charity, but to justify why the country cannot admit refugees: Allegedly, Christian social thought requires Christians to help their family and compatriots first, before helping strangers from faraway lands. But there are other moral sources of solidarity as well. In Chile, the left-wing opposition parties recalled many Chileans’ own history of emigration and exile, especially under the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in the 1970s and 1980s, to argue that Chile has a debt of gratitude to other countries that it can repay by welcoming migrants and refugees. This stance is similar to Uganda, where politicians often recall that Ugandans have also been refugees in the past.

A fourth way to define the “we” is in *legal* terms. The question of refugee admissions often touches upon a country’s laws and regulations. In principle, sovereign states are entitled to decide whether to admit or reject migrants. However, they are bound by international human rights and refugee law to admit persons fleeing from war and persecution and not to discriminate between them based on arbitrary criteria. Most countries have transposed these principles into their national laws and regulations. Some authors have emphasized that these legal obligations may shape migration and refugee policies. For example, as discussed in the introduction, world society theory argues that the spread of international human rights norms constrains national sovereignty in matters of migration policy (Soysal 1994). Christian Joppke (1998,

1999) emphasizes how domestic actors, such as advocacy groups and courts, promote human rights, which has led to more open and less discriminatory immigration policies, including on asylum, at least in liberal states.

However, we find that countries may differ in the extent politicians consider their country bound by international refugee law, even if they are liberal democracies. For example, appeals to the legal obligation to provide protection for refugees were especially frequent in Germany, where the right to asylum is enshrined in the Constitution. In contrast, Chile's conservative government avoided appeals to international refugee law despite admitting displaced Venezuelans.

A fifth way to characterize who “we” are is in *security* terms. This dimension is emphasized by the “securitization theory” (Huysmans 2006; Boswell 2007). These theorists argue that threats to public security—in terms of crime or terrorism—can lead to more restrictive migration and asylum policies. We do not deny that securitization is a potent force shaping refugee policies. But the security framing is just one option among five others. In addition, a *security threat* must be defined as such by political actors. For example, we can observe this in the case of Poland, where the PiS government described Poland as a country of law-abiding citizens threatened by foreign criminals and terrorists. However, we can also find other cases that explicitly de-emphasize the security dimension—despite high-profile incidents—such as the case of the German government after the sexual assaults at the Cologne train station on New Year's Eve 2015, or the Turkish government after a series of terrorist attacks perpetrated between 2015 and 2017.

The sixth and final aspect of national self-understanding that can be triggered in political debates about asylum policy is the host country's *international position*. On the one hand, this frame arises because admitting refugees often comes with taking sides in international politics. The decision to grant asylum to refugees implies a repudiation of the political regime of the country they are fleeing from, based on the acknowledgment that people have a legitimate reason to flee, namely that their fundamental rights are being seriously violated (Abdelaaty 2021; Moorthy & Brathwaite 2019). Correspondingly, asylum policy is often used explicitly as a political tool to shame opponent regimes. For example, during the Cold War, the West's open policy toward political refugees from the Eastern bloc was partly motivated by the desire to showcase the superiority of the “free world” (Hathaway 1990). Indeed, Lamis Elmy Abdelaaty (2021) and Christopher W. Blair and colleagues (2020) have shown that countries are systematically more open to refugees fleeing from countries with a hostile regime than countries with an allied regime. It is important to note that a country's international position is an issue open to contestation by political actors. Therefore, we trace how the position of the host country relative to the refugee-sending country is interpreted in public debates on asylum policy. For example, the decision of the right-wing Chilean government to accept refugees from Venezuela via a “democratic responsibility visa” was framed as a signal to demonstrate the superiority of Chile's liberal democracy and market economy over Venezuela's Socialist regime.

On the other hand, the issue of admitting refugees triggers a reflection on where the host country stands relative to third countries and what its international obligations are. In principle, protecting refugees is an issue that concerns the international community at large, but the burden of hosting refugees is mainly carried by those states where the refugees arrive (often neighboring countries). Consequently, we find that the politicians of host countries often debate what binds the nation to international norms and motivates them to engage in international cooperation. Indeed, scholars have examined whether membership in liberal international organizations (such as the EU) increases openness toward receiving refugees (e.g., [Helbling & Kalkum 2018](#)) because of the normative commitment to protecting human rights that derive from this membership and the potential sanctions in the case of noncompliance. We highlight that this stance depends very much on how political actors interpret the position of a country in the international arena. In our sample of countries, for example, the right-wing Polish government refused to participate in the EU's refugee relocation mechanism because it defined Poland as standing in opposition to the EU and its liberal values. In turn, President Erdoğan positions Turkey in opposition to the EU as well, but with a different effect: He describes it as the “true” defender of humanitarian principles compared to a “hypocritical” West, which speaks of human rights but does little to actually host refugees from Syria and other parts of the Middle East. In both cases, refugee policy is justified by how a country's role is defined within the international community.

1.2 Who are “they”? Framing the refugees

Apart from these different ways to describe the host society and define its collective characteristics, we argue that in political debates on asylum policy, there are also different ways to characterize the refugees as “others.” Like defining the “we,” we distinguish six frames that can serve to define the refugees. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the empirical analyses show that framing refugees is influenced by understandings of the “we” and the respective cultural repertoires.

First, political actors can highlight the *economic characteristics* of refugees in terms of their (real or imagined) skills and resources. The previous literature has argued that states are more prone to admit refugees if they bring a high human capacity because they are less likely to burden the welfare state and pose economic competition to low-income earners by depressing wages. For example, states in less developed countries sometimes rely on refugees as agents of economic development ([Adamson & Tsourapas 2020](#); [Blair et al. 2020](#)). Much in line with our previous argumentation, we emphasize that the relevance of the human potential of refugees depends on the framing by political actors. They can frame refugees as potential contributors or burdens on the national economy. For example, in the German discourse, one finds the notion that refugees can compensate for labor shortages. In contrast, in Singapore, refugees are primarily interpreted as an economic burden who cannot contribute to Singapore's skill base.

A second way to frame refugees is in *cultural* terms. In principle, international refugee law prohibits discrimination between refugees based on their national, ethnic, or racial origin. But in practice, scholars have suggested that the degree of cultural closeness and ethnic kinship between the host population and the refugees may impact the likelihood of receiving asylum. For example, Christopher W. Blair et al. (2020) have shown that if refugees are of the same ethnic background as the ruling politicians of a country, the likelihood of admission is higher (see also Abdelaaty 2021). Indeed, our data shows that politicians often allude to the cultural traits of refugees to either evoke an image of cultural incompatibility or, conversely, feelings of solidarity based on cultural similarities.

In contrast to the more “positivistic” approaches, we claim that what constitutes cultural closeness or ethnic kinship is a matter open to interpretation and not determined by given characteristics. For instance, President Erdoğan highlights the common religious bonds between Syrians and the Turkish population to support his refugee policy toward Syrian refugees. In addition, he does not discursively differentiate between Sunni Arab and Kurdish refugees from Syria, despite the ethnic tensions in Turkey between Kurds and Turks. In contrast, the political opposition tends to uphold a Turkish national identity and draws a boundary with regard to Syrian refugees as “Arabs.” This multiplicity of categorizations testifies to the socially constructed character of the variable of cultural closeness or ethnic similarity.

The third way that refugees can be framed in political debates is from a *moral* perspective and is related to the question of whether they “deserve” help. Refugees claim special rights of access to another country because of facing serious harm and human rights violations in their countries of origin. Thus, the decision to grant asylum rests on the evaluation of whether migrants “deserve” to be seen as refugees and to receive special attention. Presumably, the more severe the reason to migrate and the more vulnerable the group of refugees, the more they earn the sympathies of the hosts. Testing this claim, Eric Neumayer (2005) has found that the recognition rates of asylum seekers in Western Europe are higher for those fleeing from autocratic regimes that commit serious human rights violations, genocide, and are engaged in warfare. We argue that this “deservingness” of refugees is interpreted through framing in political discourse. For example, politicians may emphasize the atrocities of war, humanitarian disasters, or draw on the image of “women and children” to portray refugees as a vulnerable group in particular need of protection.

Fourth, this moral framing of refugees can be closely related to a *legal* frame. According to the Refugee Convention, migrants should be considered refugees if they do not move voluntarily and are forced to move because they face threats to their lives and liberty. Given the wide-ranging legal obligations for receiving states that follow from recognizing claims to asylum, we often find that political actors debate whether persons who claim to be refugees are, in fact, “real” refugees or “merely” economic migrants. Using the term “economic migrants” in contrast to “refugees” suggests that they may have decided to migrate simply in an adventurous pursuit of better opportunities and abuse the asylum system to gain unauthorized entry into another country. A striking example is the case of Chile, where both government

and opposition parties avoided labeling displaced Venezuelans as “refugees,” even though they fall under the extended definition of refugees under the Cartagena Declaration.

A fifth way to frame refugees is related to *security* aspects. As already noted, this is an issue very much highlighted in the previous literature on securitization theory (Huysmans 2006; Boswell 2007). It suggests that refugees (and migrants) are often discursively linked to crime, social disorder, and terrorism. In particular, occurrences like the 9/11 terrorist attacks may serve as windows of opportunity to introduce more restrictive asylum policy measures. Our analysis shows that, indeed, political actors sometimes frame refugees as security threats to the nation. For example, in Poland, refugees from the Middle East were framed as “terrorists” and “criminals” by the PiS government. But often, political actors also guard against establishing such a link between refugees and security threats, thus evidencing the socially constructed nature of this link.

Finally, refugees can be framed from the point of view of *international relations*. As we have argued when discussing framing the “we,” the literature suggests that states are more open to receiving refugees that flee from hostile than from friendly regimes (Abdelaaty 2021; Moorthy & Brathwaite 2019). Correspondingly, refugees can be framed as allies in the fight against a common enemy or as the enemies themselves. Effectively, the Chilean government under Sebastián Piñera portrayed displaced Venezuelans as people fighting for the same cause, namely democracy and freedom from the Socialist regime of Nicolás Maduro. This posture echoes Cold War discourse about Eastern European dissidents as allies of the West.

Table 2.1 summarizes the different ways political actors can frame the host society and refugees. As mentioned earlier in this chapter and as we show in the empirical chapters, the ways the “we” and the “others” are framed are interdependent; that is, national self-understandings typically precondition the way refugees are viewed. First, frames based on the economic dimension respond to whether the host society has the capacity to absorb refugees and what they bring in terms of human potential. Second, frames based on the cultural dimension ask whether the refugees fit “us” in terms of their ethnic and cultural characteristics. Third, frames along the moral dimension ask whether “we” have the moral duty to help refugees and whether they “deserve” our help. Fourth, the legal frame highlights “our” legal obligations (e.g., under international law) and asks about “their” rights and obligations. Frames in terms of security ask to what extent refugees pose a threat to “our” public security if they are interpreted as criminals or even terrorists. Finally, the international frame responds to what extent “we” have a reason to accept refugees in terms of international political alliances.

To recapitulate, we argue that the inflow of refugees into a country triggers debates in the public sphere on the character of the host society and who these refugees are. Political actors can define and characterize the national “self” and the refugees as “others” in different ways. In this respect, we distinguish six different frames. We relate the frames to different factors identified in previous, more explanatory studies. We emphasize, however, that the impact of these different factors on a country’s

Table 2.1 Frames of the “we” and the “others” that shape public discourse on the admission of refugees

Frame	How are “we” defined and characterized	How are the refugees as “others” defined and characterized
Economic	Level of economic development, labor market performance, and capacity of welfare state	Skills and resources of refugees
Cultural	“Invented” history of the nation, its ethnic composition, and cultural characteristics	Ethnic and cultural distance of refugees to host population
Moral	Values that define the nation (e.g., humanitarian principles, religious values, historical obligations)	Refugees’ neediness and deservingness (e.g., motivation of flight or vulnerability of the group)
Legal	Laws and norms that bind the nation (e.g., international law)	Rights and obligations of asylum-seekers (e.g., distinction between refugees and migrants)
Security	Degree of public safety	Security threats associated with refugees (e.g., terrorism, crime, or human trafficking)
International	Relationship with the country from which refugees come; international standing of the nation	Refugees as political allies or enemies

refugee policy are mediated by public meaning-making processes. In other words, they become relevant only to the extent that they are made salient and framed in specific ways. Our empirical analyses show that governments and opposition parties of the six countries draw on the different frames to different extents and fill them with content by referring to cultural repertoires specific to the political culture of their country and constituency. We argue that analyzing how the “we” and the “others” are framed leads to a better understanding of the cross-national variations in refugee admission policies and the differences between political parties within countries.

2. Cleavages and political parties’ policy position and framing within countries

It is, first and foremost, the position of the government that impacts a country’s refugee policy. But of course, the government position does not represent the entire population of a country. Different political parties with different ideologies promote their own views of whether refugees should be admitted or rejected—at least where the political system permits dissent and contestation. Among our country cases, this permission exists in Chile, Germany, Poland, and partly Turkey. We find fewer within-country differences between political parties in Singapore and Uganda, as their respective regimes cannot be considered full liberal democracies. But even in

these countries, we find positions and frames among the opposition parties that differ from the government.

We argue that not only the government's stance on admitting refugees but also all other party positionings are systematically related to how parties frame a country's national characteristics and refugees. To grasp variations between political parties within countries, we draw on the concept of "*political cleavages*." In contrast to many studies that build on cleavage theory and argue that party positioning and framing the immigration and asylum issue are structured by a new cleavage between "cosmopolitans" and "communitarians," we find significantly more variance in how parties position themselves and frame the issue. This finding leads us to conclude that one must consider the country-specific cleavage structure to understand the peculiarities of how the refugee issue is understood instead of applying a "one size fits all" perspective.

The cleavage theory goes back to the seminal work of Stein Rokkan and Seymour Martin Lipset (Rokkan 1999; Lipset & Rokkan 1967; Bartolini & Mair 1990). A "cleavage" can be defined as a historically determined conflict line consisting of at least three elements (Mair 2006). First, structural or cultural characteristics group citizens of society into different factions. Second, a cleavage exists if these different societal groups share a sense of identity, hold different values, and interpret political issues differently based on these values. Third, collective actors like interest groups, social movements, and, above all, political parties, define themselves as the representatives of social groups. Our analysis focuses on the latter two dimensions: political parties and the identities and worldviews they attempt to promote.

While questions relating to controlling national borders and managing migration (including asylum policy) have stayed at the margin of political conflicts for decades, many studies argue that in recent years, a new cleavage line has emerged in many Western societies and has moved these issues to front and center in political debates (e.g., Kriesi et al. 2006, 2008, 2012, 2022; de Wilde et al. 2019; Hooghe & Marks 2018; Norris & Inglehart 2019). The new cleavage is primarily rooted in socio-structural transformations resulting from globalization, though its origins go back to a process of post-modernization originating in the 1970s (Inglehart 1977). These transformations have entailed increased economic interconnectedness between countries, intensified international migration flows, and the transfer of political sovereignty to international organizations.⁹ These processes have led to a conflict between globalization "winners" and "losers," who have formed their own identities and values,

⁹ Since the late 1980s, economic interconnectedness across countries worldwide has increased, nation-states have ceded power to international institutions, and citizens' transnational activities and the worldwide diffusion of culture and ideas have increased. Hanspeter Kriesi and colleagues (Kriesi et al. 2006, 2008, 2012; Bornschieer 2010; Hutter & Kriesi 2022) and many others interpret globalization as a critical juncture that led to the emergence of a new cleavage, consisting of a conflict between globalization winners and losers and their representatives in the political realm. The winners include all those who profit economically and culturally from globalization, such as employees in the IT sector, but also all those who, due to their education, have the skills to make use of an open, globalized world. Elsewhere, we have described these skills as transnational human capital (Gerhards et al. 2017). The losers include those with less education, few or no formal qualifications, and employees in traditionally protected sectors (Kriesi et al. 2006) who cannot take advantage of a globalized economy and culture.

which are, in turn, associated with specific political preferences and demands on issues related to globalization.

The ideological orientations of the two groups are described with different terms in the literature, but at the core, they have a similar meaning: “cosmopolitans” versus “communitarians” (de Wilde et al. 2019), “integration” versus “demarcation” (Kriesi et al. 2008), “universalism” versus “communitarianism” (Bornschier 2010), or “GAL” (Green-Alternative-Libertarian) versus “TAN” (Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist) (Hooghe and Marks 2018). This book uses the terms “cosmopolitans” versus “communitarians.” Cosmopolitans have a rather weak identification with the nation-state and advocate a global solution to political problems; they are characterized by openness and tolerance toward migrants and other minorities. Communitarians tend to hold opposite values. They feel strongly connected to their nation-state and want their country, rather than international organizations, to be primarily responsible for solving political problems; this responsibility includes protecting the national economy and controlling immigration. In addition, communitarians are less tolerant toward immigrants and other minorities and want them to adapt to the national culture.

Other studies assume that the location of political parties on this new cleavage line shapes their positions on and how they frame immigration. While immigration policy has not previously been a major issue in left- and right-party programmatic positions (Akkermann 2015; Dancygier & Margalit 2020), particularly radical-right populist parties have driven the politicization of the issue (Grande et al. 2019; Hutter & Kriesi 2022). They hold a strict anti-immigration position that is mostly based on framing migration as a cultural threat to the integrity of the nation (Kriesi et al. 2012; Helbling 2014; Lehmann & Zobel 2018). In contrast, new left parties frame immigration in terms of universalist values and multiculturalism, thus advocating for more open border policies. In between, centrist parties are confronted with conflicting demands that push them toward more moderate positions: While center-left parties tend to advocate economic closure but cultural openness, conservative parties tend to advocate economic openness and cultural closure (Akkermann 2015; Dancygier & Margalit 2020).

In our study, we draw on the theory of cleavage structure to account for the different positions and framings of political parties on admitting refugees. So far, research has not specifically focused on the refugee issue as such but has treated it as part of the broader issue of migration policy. Following the diagnosis of a new cleavage between cosmopolitans and communitarians, we had initially assumed that the way political parties frame the refugee issue and position themselves in favor or against granting them asylum could be explained mainly by their location on this new cleavage line. This reasoning is because admitting refugees is an issue that speaks directly to several dimensions of the ideologies of cosmopolitanism and communitarianism. It means not only opening the borders of the nation-state to “strangers” but also accepting the limitations of national sovereignty imposed by international law and human rights.

We find that some cases map quite well onto the conflict between cosmopolitans and communitarians, but other cases do not. These deviating cases can only

be understood by taking into account a country's specific cleavage structure. For example, contestation over admitting refugees in Poland can be well accounted for by a cleavage between cosmopolitan and communitarian electorates that has superseded the conflict between post-communist and anti-communist parties. Accordingly, the right-wing populist Law and Justice party, in government between 2015 and 2023, rejected participating in the EU's refugee relocation mechanism based on the construction of the Polish nation as a Christian nation that stands in opposition to the EU and its liberal values. In contrast, the liberal Civic Platform stressed Poland's historical commitment to Western Europe and support for universal rights.

However, the theory of a cosmopolitan–communitarian cleavage does not apply to other cases, as pro-refugee positions are not necessarily embedded in a cosmopolitan political party ideology nor anti-refugee positions in a communitarian one. For example, Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party pursues a rather open refugee policy despite not having a cosmopolitan ideology (for a similar argument, see [Morgül 2022](#)). The marked differences between the government and the oppositional Republican People's Party in Turkey with regard to their policy positions toward Syrian refugees rather seem to map onto another cleavage, namely a secular–religious one: While Erdoğan refers to an obligation of Muslim solidarity toward Syrian refugees, the Republican People's Party stresses the sovereignty of the secular Turkish nation-state. Another case is Singapore, where both the government and the opposition favor a multiethnic society, a characteristic that usually speaks for a cosmopolitan orientation. However, both the government and the opposition are strongly opposed to admitting refugees. Thus, the cleavage structure differs from country to country, and we argue that framing the refugee issue is embedded in a society's specific conflict line. Accordingly, our study follows Lipset's and Rokkan's original argument that a precise country-specific analysis is needed to understand the peculiarities of how a certain topic is framed in a country.¹⁰

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¹⁰ Of course, while parties are constrained by a given cleavage structure in their framings and policy positions, they also have the opportunity to interpret and frame political issues differently, which in turn gives them some leeway in regard to the position they take on policies. We take this into consideration in our study as well.

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3

The design of the study

To analyze political discourse on admitting refugees, we conducted a qualitative discourse analysis of parliamentary debates and other political statements in six different countries.¹ In this chapter, we detail how our analysis differs from other discourse analyses, why we chose parliamentary debates, how we sampled our material, coded the speeches, and analyzed the data, and how we conducted interviews with party officials as well as experts and academics to corroborate our interpretations.

1. How our approach differs from other discourse analyses

“Discourse analysis” is an umbrella term used to describe a variety of different methods to analyze spoken or written language, with an interest in the question of how social reality is constructed through discourse (Ruiz 2009). One important strand of discourse analyses on admitting refugees focuses on the mass media forum, namely, how the press frames refugees and asylum policy. It often takes a quantitative approach by operationalizing the dominant media frames and counting their distribution to compare, for example, left- and right-wing media outlets or different countries or to trace developments over time (e.g., van Gorp 2005; Berry et al. 2015; Chouliaraki, Georgiou & Zaborowski 2017). Typically, these studies identify two competing media frames: a “humanitarian frame,” which portrays refugees as victims fleeing war and conflict and needing solidarity, and a “security frame,” which portrays refugees as a threat to national security. Findings show that these frames are distributed unequally between countries and newspapers depending on their editorial line. For example, with regard to the European refugee crisis from 2015 onwards, Southern European countries leaned toward a more humanitarian framing, whereas Eastern European countries like Hungary but also the UK emphasized security issues. However, as these studies mainly adopt a quantitative approach, they typically lack more in-depth accounts and interpretations of the specific cultural repertoires that guide the framing of refugees in different countries. Furthermore, as they focus on the mass media forum and not directly on the discourse of the political actors themselves, they typically do not intend to relate frames to political outcomes.

¹ We use the terms “discourse analysis” and “content analysis” of political speeches and statements as synonyms.

Another prominent line of research focuses on the qualitative analysis of discourse in a variety of forums, such as the press, in parliament, or on social media.² Many qualitative studies are inspired by the tradition of “critical discourse analysis” (Reisigl & Wodak 2001) that aims to uncover how discourse legitimizes the discrimination and exclusion of migrants, asylum seekers, and other minorities through different discursive strategies. In contrast to quantitative analyses, these studies provide important in-depth insights into how refugees are framed in different contexts. We review the studies dealing with those countries in our sample in the respective country chapters and use them to validate our results (e.g., Krzyżanowski 2018, 2020; Polat 2018; Vollmer & Karakayali 2018; Yanasmayan et al. 2019). We have also used these studies as a guide to develop our category system for the discourse analysis, as explained in Section 3.

However, we think these investigations have some methodological limitations. First, most of these studies are not comparative, analyzing the discourse in only one country and, quite often, of only one political actor. A recent special issue by Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou & Wodak (2018) unites discourse analyses on the European refugee crisis from different European countries. It highlights the importance of national contextual factors in shaping the discourse on refugees (e.g., as a transit or destination country on refugee routes, national histories, and values), but these are not brought into a comparative framework, which would leverage the analytical potential of comparisons.

Our comparative approach enables us to pinpoint the similarities and differences in refugee discourse between countries. We can show that different frames are of different importance in the six sample countries and, most significantly, that their meaning is specific to each country. For example, the cultural frame is relevant in most countries. However, in each country, different cultural narratives matter, such as the reference to the Ottoman Empire and Islam in Turkey, Christianity in Poland, and Pan-Africanism in Uganda.

Second, qualitative studies aim for a “thick description” (Geertz 1973) of a specific phenomenon and are normally not so interested in linking different policy positions to the frames political actors use to legitimize them. In contrast, we do not only seek to describe in detail the framing differences between countries and between political parties within a country. Rather, we attempt to build a bridge between a hermeneutic perspective on the one hand and a more “explanatory” view on the other by considering the meaning-making process and relating the frames actors use to their refugee policies.

Third, the stated aim of “critical discourse analysis” is “demystifying the—manifest or latent—persuasive or ‘manipulative’ character of discursive practices” (Reisigl & Wodak 2016: 88). As the name suggests, critical discourse analysis stands in the tradition of the critical theory of society. It not only attempts to describe social phenomena

² Qualitative discourse analyses are carried out in a number of different ways (for an overview see Keller 2013), for example, following “critical discourse analysis” (Reisigl & Wodak 2001) or the “sociology of knowledge approach to discourse” (Keller 2011). Our analysis takes some inspiration from these approaches but is not identical to them, as we explain in Section 3.

but also criticizes relationships of power and subordination in society (typically from a left-liberal political perspective). With regard to migration, it tends to consider that state policies on border control or closure are illegitimate and violate the rights and dignity of migrants. While this is certainly a question of political debate, we consider it problematic from a Weberian perspective when such normative positions inform empirical studies for two reasons. First, the normative reference point is usually set and not further substantiated with arguments, neglecting the broad debate in political philosophy on whether nation-states can legitimately close their borders. We return to this normative debate in Chapter 10. Second, the normative point of view may influence the interpretation of the analyzed discourse and can lead to biased conclusions.

2. Sampling: Selecting countries and relevant discourse

2.1 Selecting countries

The selection of the six countries of our analysis—Chile, Germany, Poland, Singapore, Turkey and Uganda—primarily follows an exploratory logic. The considerations that have structured our choices are described in this section.

Public debates on admitting refugees usually only take place when refugees seek to enter a country, and the topic becomes perceived as a problem. All countries in our analysis have in common that they face significant pressures to admit refugees and asylum seekers from various countries of origin, even though the degree to which they are affected varies. In Turkey and Uganda, refugees arrive from directly neighboring countries (Syria in the case of Turkey; South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the case of Uganda); in Chile and Germany, refugees come from more distant countries (Venezuela and Syria, respectively), attracted by socio-economic conditions; and in Poland and Singapore, pressure exists to admit refugees by virtue of their membership in international organizations, such as the EU and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations).

From the large number of countries affected by refugee flows, we first selected three countries all confronted with the same group of people, namely Syrian refugees fleeing the civil war in their country that broke out in 2011. We focused on two countries that have pursued an open refugee policy and taken in most Syrian refugees: Turkey, a neighboring country of Syria, and Germany, the main reception country in the EU. With Poland, we included a Central and Eastern European member state of the EU that vehemently opposed the admission of Syrian refugees through the EU relocation mechanism but which, at the same time, signaled readiness to admit Ukrainians fleeing the conflict with Russia. Analyzing the discourse in these three countries allows us to demonstrate how different conceptions of the nation's collective characteristics and interpretations of refugees shape their respective policy approaches to the same group of refugees.

In a second step, we extended the number of cases to non-European countries (Uganda, Chile, and Singapore) to verify whether the results found on the basis of the analyses of the first three countries are generalizable for understanding refugee policies beyond Europe. Even though less developed countries host most refugees in the world, these hosting countries are rarely included in comparative discourse analyses. Uganda hosts one of the largest numbers of refugees in the world and pursues an acknowledged open-door policy, especially with regard to refugees originating in South Sudan but also those from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Chile hosts a large number of displaced persons from Venezuela who have escaped socioeconomic and political instability under the Socialist regime of Nicolás Maduro but has pursued an ambivalent admission policy. Finally, Singapore is located in a region that has recently witnessed the exodus of the Rohingya fleeing religious persecution in Myanmar. Although Singapore is a member of ASEAN and is among the most developed states in the region, it has staunchly refused to take in any refugees.

The six countries differ in a variety of factors that have been mentioned in the literature to influence a country's refugee policy. It is, however, an open question whether these "objective" factors or rather their interpretations influence refugee policies. First and most importantly, we have included countries with different degrees of adherence to what we call the "liberal script," to gauge the extent that support for liberal principles and universal human rights shapes refugee admission policies. Adherence to the liberal script is a construct that cannot be easily measured.³ We considered the Liberal Component Index of the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index, which scores countries on such criteria as equality before the law and individual liberties, as well as judicial and legislative constraints on the executive (*Varieties of Democracy 2022*). Scores range between 0 (least liberal) and 1 (most liberal). We took the scores for the first and last years of the respective periods of analysis. These indices suggest the following rank order from most to least liberal: Germany, Chile, Poland, Singapore, Uganda, and Turkey, as shown in Table 3.1.⁴

Second, we have included countries with different levels of socioeconomic development, as expressed by indicators such as the Human Development Index (HDI), which combines measurements of economic standard of living, educational achievement, and life expectancy. In our sample, Germany has the highest HDI as of 2022 (0.947), followed by Singapore (0.938), Poland (0.880), Chile (0.851), Turkey (0.820), and Uganda (0.544) (*UNDP 2022*). This allows us to explore the different frames for interpreting the variable economic situations of a country.

³ Following our argument that the liberal script is institutionalized in international law, we had first considered the number of international human rights treaties ratified by each country (*OHCHR 2022*). However, this measure is not optimal, since international law is not always applied domestically and even if international treaties are not ratified, there might be other domestic safeguards of fundamental rights in place.

⁴ The "Civil Liberties Rating" compiled by the nongovernmental organization Freedom House, which scores the freedom of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, the rule of law, and the protection of personal autonomy and individual rights, comes to a similar ranking (*Freedom House 2022*).

Table 3.1 Overview of a country's adherence to the "liberal script"

Country and period of analysis	V-Dem Liberal Component Index
Germany (2015 to 2018)	0.97 to 0.96
Chile (2017 to 2019)	0.96 to 0.94
Poland (2014 to 2016)	0.93 to 0.83
Singapore (2009 to 2019)	0.7 to 0.73
Uganda (2011 to 2021)	0.65 to 0.55
Turkey (2013 to 2019)	0.64 to 0.23

Finally, our countries vary in the cultural proximity between their society and the refugees. Some countries face refugee movements that could be expected to be framed as culturally close (e.g., from Syrians to Turkey; Venezuelans to Chile; South Sudanese to Uganda), while in other cases, refugees could be expected to be framed as culturally distant (e.g., Syrians to Germany and Poland; Rohingya to Singapore). As we have repeatedly argued, our analysis shows that cultural closeness is a matter of interpretation and does not necessarily conform to these expectations.

As already discussed in Chapter 1, the fact that our study covers only six countries and that they vary along so many dimensions means that we cannot provide a causal account of the variables that may impact a country's refugee policy (for a discussion, see [Goldthorpe 2007](#)). Furthermore, the generalizability of our descriptive findings beyond our cases is limited. However, we are confident to argue that a) our typology of six frames can be used to classify political discourse in other countries as well, and b) that our finding that political actors' conceptions of a country's collective identity on the one hand and the refugees on the other is key for understanding the policy preferences regarding the admission or rejection of refugees holds true also for other countries, even if the *substantive* characterizations of the features of national identity and refugees vary from country to country.

2.2 Focusing on parliamentary debates

To cover the discourse in a country and explore the frames used in this discourse, we analyzed debates in the public forum of parliaments. In a few cases, we analyzed other texts in addition to the speeches in parliament. In Singapore, for example, we also analyzed a crucial White Paper on migration policy, which led to a controversial debate in parliament. Turkish President Erdoğan cares little about the institutional structure of the public sphere and has given important speeches on his refugee policy outside of conventional venues; we thus included these speeches in our sample as well. In some countries, we also included party manifestos to gain additional information.

There are several reasons why analyzing debates in parliament is particularly suitable for reconstructing public discourse. First, parliaments have a representative

function, as their composition is determined by the results of general elections. The fact that different parties are represented in all six parliaments allows us to analyze the framing differences between political parties representing different population groups.⁵ Second, parliaments are an arena for political communication and discussion where the representatives of different political parties legitimize their policy positions. They typically do so in line with the ideological program of their respective party or faction. Thus, parliamentary debates provide a window into the different party political programs. Third, the debates in parliament are very often linked to decision-making, as the speakers refer to policy proposals and justify why they are in favor of or against them. Since we are interested in the frames that support politicians' policy preferences, analyzing parliamentary debates is a suitable way of answering our research question. Finally, there is a more pragmatic argument in favor of analyzing parliamentary debates. Large cross-national comparisons, such as this study, require easily accessible data, and most parliaments publish their proceedings online.

However, as not all countries in our sample are full democracies, the role of parliaments varies between the six countries in our sample. During our period of analysis, Chile, Germany, and Poland were full democracies (even though in Poland, the quality of democracy declined somewhat). For these countries, the parties represented in parliament emerged from free elections, freedom of speech is not constrained, and parliaments play an important role in policymaking. In contrast, Singapore, Uganda, and Turkey are not full democracies. However, even in such authoritarian contexts, parliamentary talk is not meaningless, as politicians in power have to ensure that citizens accept their policies if they do not want to risk being removed from office (Geddes & Zaller 1989). As Alexander Dukalskis (2017) has shown, autocratic leaders make an effort to legitimize their policies before the citizens with public statements.⁶

Nevertheless, one has to take into account that even though all three less democratic countries in our sample have a multiparty system, which means that several parties are represented in parliament and are elected by the citizens, opposition parties are hindered in the elections by the government, so that the parliaments reflect the opinion of the citizens only to a limited extent. In addition, the freedom of

⁵ The structure and role of parliaments differ between political systems. Important for the context of our study might be the difference between "working" and "debating parliaments" (Steffani 1979: 95–97). "Debating parliaments" are typical of parliamentary democracies. In them, the government emerges from parliament, and parliamentary debates have the function of publicly staging debates between the government and the opposition. In contrast, "working parliaments" are more typical of presidential forms of government. In them, parliamentary work mostly occurs within specialized committees that control the government; plenary debates only have a subordinate role. Numerous studies show that parliamentary types impact the discursive strategies chosen by the MPs, such as the length and degree of polarization of their speeches (for an overview, see Bächtiger 2014). However, we are more focused on the content (in terms of frames) of the parliamentary speeches. Even though it is more difficult to reconstruct underlying frames in working parliaments than in debating parliaments, our experience shows that the frames can also be reconstructed well in working parliaments. We do not assume that parliamentary structures affect the content of MPs' framing of asylum policies.

⁶ Andreas Schedler (2013: 55) gives the following reason for autocracies' engagement in public relations: "Modern authoritarian regimes are post-traditional and post-transcendental. They cannot ground their right to rule on secure claims of tradition or divine will. Ideologically homeless, lacking a secure roof of legitimacy over their exposed heads, they have to tap non-religious sources of legitimacy."

expression of Members of Parliament (MPs) might be constrained. As we discuss in the respective chapters, we find that the government and opposition parties in Uganda and Singapore are largely in agreement, while this is not the case in Turkey, where political opposition is highly critical of the Erdoğan government. One could assume that the high level of agreement between the government and the opposition parties in Singapore and Uganda may be due to the restriction of freedom of expression in these countries. However, we show in the country chapters that this cannot be the main explanation. Accordingly, we can also claim that parliamentary debates reflect party positions quite well for these countries. Thus, even in the case of more authoritarian regimes, analyzing parliamentary debates may provide a window into the ideologies and worldviews that shape political responses to refugees, though they are less representative of the citizenry.

2.3 Selecting specific debates

Debates in the public sphere, in general, and in parliaments, in particular, take place when they are triggered by *critical discourse moments*. These are moments when, due to a certain event, an issue becomes an important topic of public debate. Critical discourse moments can also be triggered by political actors themselves, for example, when the government proposes new legislation on migration and asylum. We determined critical discourse moments that occurred since 2010 for all countries in our sample and focused on debates in their aftermath. The millions of refugees who had to leave Syria due to the civil war since 2011 triggered the discourse on admitting refugees in Turkey, Germany, and Poland. In the case of Poland, there was also a debate about Ukrainian refugees leaving Ukraine due to the conflict with Russia in the Donbas region in 2014 (the displacement caused by Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 is no longer within the scope of this book). The discourse in Chile was triggered by a rising number of refugees and immigrants from Venezuela since approximately 2015 due to the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions in that country, whereas Rohingya refugees fleeing from religious and ethnic persecution in Myanmar constitute the critical discourse moment for our analysis of the Singaporean debate. Finally, in Uganda, the rapidly rising number of refugees fleeing the civil war in South Sudan since its independence in 2011 constitutes the critical discourse moment.

With the help of search engines, we selected all *debates and speeches* in parliaments that took place in the context of a critical discourse moment. We concentrated on plenary debates and excluded debates in committee. Nevertheless, it turned out that some of the debates were only about administrative and technical issues related to asylum policy. Since we are interested in political party framing of whether a country should admit refugees or not, we excluded these technical debates and selected only those fundamental debates that contain frames and arguments on the question of admission. As mentioned in Section 2.2, in some cases, we also included public statements made outside of the parliament.

In parliament, several parties have their say, and usually, several MPs speak for one party. We ensured that the statements of *all parties* represented in parliament were considered for the discourse analysis. Party members have a different standing, which refers to the authority with which they can speak on behalf of the entire party. For example, the floor leader has the highest standing within the parliamentary group. Therefore, we first selected and analyzed the speeches of the MPs with the highest standing, who also usually speak first; then the speeches of the MPs with the second highest standing were selected and analyzed, and so on. Occasionally, speakers were also selected because they speak for different constituencies within a party. For example, within Singapore's ruling party, some representatives also speak on behalf of Singapore's different ethnic groups.

We continued to analyze speeches by party members until we reached the point of “*theoretical saturation*” (Glaser & Strauss 1967: 61; Saunders et al. 2018). Theoretical saturation means that analyzing further texts would not give us any additional information on party positioning and framing of the refugee issue because the frames and arguments begin to repeat themselves. The remaining speeches were read, roughly interpreted, and compared to previous speeches to ensure that we had reached the point of saturation. On this basis, it was decided to exclude further speeches from the data analysis.

How the specific critical discourse moments, parliamentary debates, and speeches from which parties were selected in the different countries is explained in more detail in the country chapters. Some speeches had to be translated into English (those from Poland and Turkey), given that the authors are not proficient in the respective languages. The number of speeches analyzed per country varies for two reasons. First, the length of the debates differs between countries.⁷ And second, in some countries, we had to analyze more speeches to reach the point of theoretical saturation. Overall, the distribution is as follows: Chile: 30; Germany: 19 (plus 7 party manifestos); Poland: 27; Turkey: 17 (plus 8 party manifestos); Singapore: 7 speeches and 13 parliamentary Q & A sessions; Uganda: 3 speeches given outside of parliament and 34 parliamentary debates, in which various MPs commented on admitting refugees, with rather brief statements.

3. Coding and analyzing public discourse

Our methodological approach to discourse analysis follows the basic principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Even though, as Ian Dey argued, there are “probably as many versions of grounded theory as there were grounded theorists” (Dey 1999: 2), all versions have some fundamental procedures in common, constituting the way we conducted our study. Commonalities consist of an inductive process of generating theories “grounded” in the empirical material, in this case, textual data. This process is carried out by developing categories of interpretation

⁷ Differences might be related to the type of parliament.

and using them to code the text in order to analyze it in a theoretically meaningful way. Methodically, our analysis consists of a “qualitative content analysis” of political speeches and statements (Mayring 2000; Kuckartz 2014).

In the first step, we developed a *system of categories* of interpretation that helped us sort and systematize the raw data (see Figure 3.1). The categories of interpretation (“thematical categories,” following Kuckartz 2014: 71–72) were developed in an iterative process. On the one hand, we proceeded inductively. Based on the research question and initial theoretical assumptions, the first speeches were analyzed with the intention of developing a system of categories. Through the analysis of the first speeches, new theoretical ideas emerged. On the other hand, we also proceeded deductively. It soon became apparent that our categories of interpretation present some overlaps with those developed by scholars in the field of “critical discourse analysis” (Reisigl & Wodak 2001). For example, our core categories “defining the ‘we’” and “defining the ‘other’” are close to what Ruth Wodak and her colleagues call discursive strategies of “nomination” and “predication,” in which in-groups and out-groups are constructed and characterized. We adjusted our categories of interpretation with reference to this approach, keeping in mind our specific research question, thus placing different emphases. This iterative process was repeated until a point of theoretical saturation was reached, and the final category system could be applied to all speeches.⁸

Next, using this category system, each speech was interpreted by a member of the research group, and the interpretation was written in the form of a “*thematic case summary*” (Kuckartz 2014: 81–83). To aid the interpretation, we inductively developed a list of possible manifestations and characteristics each category could take.⁹ For example, the “arguments for admitting or excluding refugees” could be (among others): “Migrants/refugees should be excluded because they threaten our culture (in terms of ethnicity, religion, habits, or history)” or “Migrants/refugees should be admitted because they contribute to our economy (labor market or welfare state).” This interpretation was then checked, corrected, and supplemented by two other members of the team. The amendments were then checked again by the person who had made the first interpretation. This procedure was intended to ensure that at least a minimum level of intersubjectivity in interpreting the speeches was achieved. Although we cannot measure the level of agreement between the interpretations by calculating reliability coefficients, the procedure goes beyond many other qualitative studies in which usually only one researcher carries out the interpretation.

In a third step, we further specified *the core categories of analysis*. As in almost all studies, more information was collected and interpreted during data collection than was finally considered in the data analysis. Of the various categories, some emerged as particularly relevant to our research question; we have highlighted these categories in Figure 3.1. First, since we want to understand the actors’ respective preferences

⁸ Figure 4.1 in Udo Kuckartz’s textbook (2014) graphically depicts our approach to developing the category system.

⁹ Our list bears some resemblance with what Reisigl & Wodak (2001) call “topoi of argumentation.”

<p>1. Context information (1) Which critical discourse moment precedes the speech and triggers it? (2) Describe the standing of the speaker. What political offices have they held in the past? What position do they hold within their party in the present? And what political ideology do they have?</p>
<p>2. Problem diagnosis What specific problem is defined by the speaker as the central problem that triggered the discussion (e.g., the number of “illegal immigrants” in a country; refugees dying in the Mediterranean Sea)?</p>
<p>3. Policy Position Is the speaker more in favor of or against accepting refugees, and what specific policy proposals do they support?</p>
<p>4. Defining the “We” (collective identity) How does the speaker define the identity of their country? Do they rather refer to economic, cultural, or other characteristics? And how do they define the role of their country relative to the international order, to other countries, and especially to the country from which the refugees come?</p>
<p>5. Defining the “Other” (refugees) Does the speaker use economic, cultural, or other categories to describe the refugees? Do they emphasize the plight of refugees or their threat to national security?</p>
<p>6. Arguments for admitting or excluding refugees Which arguments are presented in the speech for admitting or excluding refugees? The arguments are often based on how refugees are characterized and the relationship of the refugees’ characteristics to the described identity of the country.</p>
<p>7. Refugees’ path to integration Speakers often discuss how refugees to be admitted or those already living in a country should integrate into society. To what extent and how can refugees become part of the “we”? Is a model of assimilation, mutual adaptation, multiculturalism, or segregation supported, and which criteria of in-group membership do refugees have to comply with?</p>
<p>8. Self-description of the speaker and description of political competitors (1) How does the speaker characterize and legitimize himself? What makes them a problem-solver (e.g., being a “representative of the people” or “experienced politician”)? (2) How does the speaker describe the political competitors?</p>
<p>9. Stylistic devices Which stylistic devices does the speaker use to support their storyline (e.g., metaphors, analogies, catchphrases)? Which tone of language characterizes the speech (e.g., emotional and populist or rather technical language)?</p>
<p>10. Overall storyline Once a text has been analyzed along the different categories and compared with other texts, the interpreter should try to condense the text to its core message that connects all the preceding elements and to find a “label” that best expresses the text’s stance towards immigration and refugees.</p>

Figure 3.1 System of categories for interpreting parliamentary speeches

on refugee policy, describing their policy preferences is naturally one of the more significant categories. In this respect, we are not interested in an actor’s position on the details of a specific legislative proposal but rather in its general attitude toward accepting refugees. Second, as explained in more detail in Chapter 2, the analysis of the speeches revealed that the way politicians frame the collective identity of their nation and characterize the refugees are particularly relevant for justifying their position on whether a country should accept refugees or not. Speakers typically construct

their arguments in favor or against a policy by linking specific definitions of the “we” to specific definitions of the refugees, following the pattern, “Because we are x and they are y, we have to z.” Focusing on policies and the two key framing dimensions does not mean that the other categories were insignificant for data analysis, merely that they are less important and are included in the analyses as background information.

Fourth, for our core categories of analysis (“defining the ‘we’” and “defining the ‘other’”), we systematically aggregated the interpretations across all speeches into the most important *subcategories* (see also Kuckartz 2014: 75–79). These subcategories constitute what we call “frames.” As we have seen in Chapter 2 (see Table 2.1), for example, the “we” could be framed in economic terms with reference to such parameters as economic development or in cultural terms with reference to the ethnic composition of the nation. Again, specifying the main frames occurred both inductively, through a process of constant comparison and systematization of the text material, as well as deductively, by linking our interpretations to the previous literature. In Chapter 2, we described in detail how the different ways the “we” and the “others” could be framed relate to the different factors that shape country-specific asylum policies identified in the literature.

Finally, we aggregated the different interpretations for each political party and constructed “*case overviews*” (Kuckartz 2014: 86–88). Our study is interested both in describing and understanding differences between countries, which we measure by analyzing the policies supported and frames used by the government and governing parties, as well as in understanding differences within countries, which we measure through opposition party speeches. Representatives of the government of a country and the opposition parties typically make several speeches on a subject, each of which we have interpreted individually, as explained in this section. On this basis, we aggregated the interpretations of the speeches of both the government and the various parties within a country. This aggregation allowed case overviews of the governments and the different parties to emerge, capturing their positions on admitting refugees and their dominant frames. It became apparent that neither governments nor political parties greatly changed their political positions and frames over time. Thus, information was not lost during the aggregation process. These case overviews form the backbone of the presentation of our results in the following chapters.

4. Expert interviews

After completing the discourse analysis, we conducted expert interviews. The key function of the interviews was to validate our interpretation of the public discourse with country experts, academics, and policymakers involved in migration and refugee policy. Our key concern was to corroborate the plausibility of our analyses. In addition, we sought to gain additional information on how political actors of a country interpret the refugee issue, as well as contextual information on the country’s migration and refugee policy.

To sample respondents, we proceeded in two steps. First, we tried to contact the MPs of the main political parties, government officials, and their advisors whose parliamentary speeches we interpreted in our discourse analyses. Since MPs and government officials typically have limited time, we mostly interviewed their respective advisors. Second, we consulted experts (both academic and policy) on migration and refugee issues in each country. As we explain in more detail in the respective country chapters, in some countries, we had difficulties recruiting interviewees. For example, in Singapore, only one MP we contacted was willing to talk to us. Instead, we conducted interviews with civil society actors and academic experts.

Given that our study was realized during the Covid-19 pandemic, we conducted most of the interviews via videoconference since in-person interviews were limited due to travel restrictions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Overall, we conducted eighteen interviews: seven in Chile, two in Poland, four in Singapore, three in Turkey, and two in Uganda. Considering that our expert interviews only serve to corroborate our interpretations, we did not conduct interviews in Germany, which is well known to us.

Our interview guideline was adapted depending on the country and the expertise of the interviewee. In the interviews with experts, we mainly tried to check whether our interpretations of the parliamentary debates coincided with their views. The interviews with policymakers consisted of questions following the main dimensions of our discourse analysis: First, we questioned them on their migration and refugee policy positions, that is, whether they are in favor or against admitting refugees and under what conditions. Second, we asked them about the motives that guide their policy preferences, with a view to reconstructing the definitions of “us” and “them” that underpin their preferences. In particular, we tried to validate the results of our discourse analyses by eliciting our respondents’ opinions on some of our interpretations. Third, we asked the interviewees about other factors that have influenced their policy positions as well as the different points of view within their party and between parties. Finally, we used the interviews to clarify issues that had remained unclear from our discourse analysis.

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PART II
RESPONDING TO THE EXODUS
OF SYRIAN REFUGEES

4

Open doors for “brothers and sisters” in faith

Turkey’s refugee policy toward Syrians

1. Introduction

The Syrian civil war has led to the largest refugee crisis in the world. Since 2011, about 6.7 million Syrians have been displaced abroad, mostly fleeing to neighboring countries and the EU (UNHCR 2023). Of these, Turkey hosts by far the largest number (around 3.5 million as of 2022).¹ Several studies have shown that it is mainly right-wing populist parties that oppose admitting refugees and immigrants, portraying themselves as protectors of the country’s national borders and framing immigrants as a cultural and economic threat (e.g., Kriesi et al. 2008; Golder 2016; Grande et al. 2019). Turkey’s “Justice and Development Party” (in Turkish, “Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi,” abbreviated as AKP), which under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been in power since 2003, belongs to the group of right-wing populist parties. However, with regard to Syrian refugees, the AKP pursues a very different policy than one might have theoretically expected from a right-wing populist party. From the very beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the Turkish government pursued an open-door policy, a policy that has changed only slightly to this day, even if the population’s approval for admitting refugees has increasingly waned (Tahiroğlu 2022: 6). Among the 3.5 million Syrian refugees there are also many Kurds, although Kurds living in Turkey have been suppressed by the Turkish government for many years.² To understand why the conservative populist government in Turkey pursues an open refugee policy and how the opposition parties in the Turkish parliament deviate from the government’s policy, it is worth analyzing how these parties define Turkish identity and how refugees are portrayed in the public discourse.

The government’s definition of Turkey’s identity consists of three elements. First, the AKP’s reference point for an imagined community is the Ottoman Empire. By referring to a “glorious past,” the government blurs the nationally defined borders

¹ The exact number of refugees is difficult to determine and varies slightly between different sources because many refugees are not registered.

² Due to the siege of Kobani by the IS (Islamic State) in late 2014, almost 400,000 Kurdish Syrians fled to Turkey (Balta et al. 2022). According to estimates, there are 10–15 percent Kurdish Syrians among Syrian refugees; 16.1 percent of respondents in a survey of Syrian refugees stated that their mother tongue is Kurdish (Erdoğan 2020).

of the modern Turkish Republic. It extends the definition of the “we” by including former subjects of the Ottoman Empire, among them those of modern Syria. The AKP’s reference to the community of Islamic “brothers and sisters” in faith constitutes a second characteristic of the “we” that transcends Turkey’s current borders. Third, by referring to the Ottoman Empire and Islam, the AKP shifts Turkey’s position in the geography of international politics, defining Turkey as a regional power that feels responsible for what happens in the Middle East. At the same time, this distances Turkey from Western societies and the European Union, which stand for the negative “other.” Turkey is defined as morally superior to the West. The West talks liberally about human rights and humanitarianism yet closes its borders in times of need, while Turkey is framed as a country of action that stands by its humanitarian values.

Building upon this definition of the “we,” Syrian refugees are not defined as “others” but as part of the “we.” They are portrayed as people in humanitarian need and as “brothers and sisters” based on their common history of belonging to the Ottoman Empire and their shared religion. The framing of refugees manifests itself not only in which characteristics are evoked and emphasized but also in which consequences are not mentioned. Even though admitting 3.5 million Syrian refugees is a substantial challenge for Turkish institutions and citizens, this issue is hardly ever addressed by the AKP.

Interestingly, the left-wing opposition party “Peoples’ Democratic Party” (in Turkish, “Halkların Demokratik Partisi,” abbreviated as HDP), like the AKP, is in favor of accepting Syrian refugees. However, that party’s refugee policy is based on a completely different framing of Turkey’s collective identity and Syrian refugees. First, the HDP has a rather cosmopolitan idea of a modern nation-state. From its perspective, Turkey does not belong to citizens of Turkish ethnicity alone but to citizens of all groups, including all ethnic and religious groups and people having different sexual identities. Refugees from Syria are included in such a concept of a diverse and multicultural collective identity. Second, the HDP envisions Turkey as a country committed to universal human rights and international law. In HDP’s view, Syrians are not guests but have refugee status according to international law. They should be given the opportunity to become citizens of Turkey. This stance would also mean that Syrians in Turkey would no longer be treated inhumanely and exploited economically, as is the case at the moment.

In contrast to the ruling AKP and the left-wing opposition party HDP, the Kemalist “Republican People’s Party” (in Turkish, “Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi,” abbreviated as CHP) takes a more skeptical stance toward admitting Syrian refugees. The CHP is the strongest opposition party in the Turkish parliament. At the beginning and on the surface, the CHP was in favor of admitting refugees. However, at its core, it views refugees very skeptically. Over time, the latent rejection of Syrian refugees has become manifest. This policy position relates to how the party frames Turkish identity and sees Syrian refugees. Unlike the AKP, the CHP rejects any reference to the Ottoman Empire. Its point of departure for defining Turkish identity is the modern Turkish nation-state of 1923, which the CHP argues should be oriented

toward the West and not the East. Moreover, Turkey is facing economic challenges, so it cannot afford to take in so many refugees. The task of the state should be primarily to provide for the welfare of its own citizens. Against this background, Syrian refugees are interpreted as an economic and cultural burden and a security risk.

Similar to the CHP, the “Nationalist Movement Party” (in Turkish, “Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi,” abbreviated as MHP) takes a critical position with regard to admitting Syrian refugees. The MHP was in opposition to the AKP until 2018; since then, it has supported the AKP government in a joint alliance, which has led to the MHP being somewhat more cautious in its criticism of the AKP’s refugee policy. Although Syrian refugees are seen as guests who are in humanitarian need, they are interpreted as unwelcome guests. The idea that Syrian refugees should return to Syria as soon as possible relates to MHP’s definition of Turkish identity. The MHP shares its nationalist orientation with the CHP but defines Turkish identity more strongly in terms of ethnicity. Accordingly, foreign groups ethnically similar to Turks—such as Turks in Bulgaria or the Turkish minority in Syria—are more welcome in Turkey than refugees of different ethnicity. For the majority of Syrians, the criterion of ethnic similarity does not apply. Accordingly, they are interpreted as an economic burden and security risk. This anti-immigration position is especially true for Kurdish refugees from Syria.³

Our analysis refers to the period from 2013 to 2019 and does not cover the most recent parliamentary and presidential election in 2023, which saw Erdoğan re-elected in a run-off against opposition candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu of the CHP and forming an electoral alliance with MHP and other parties. Before and during the election campaign, the issue of Syrian refugees became a central topic of public debate as more and more citizens spoke out against Syrian refugees. This process was accelerated by the founding of a new far-right party (“Victory Party,” in Turkish, “Zafer Partisi,” abbreviated as ZP), whose leader Ümit Özdağ focused almost exclusively on opposing the admission of refugees (Tahiroğlu 2022). However, compared to the basic positions of the parties we analyzed, their framing did not change significantly (Tahiroğlu 2022; Balta et al. 2022). While the ruling AKP party became more hesitant in its pro-refugee position due to the public sentiment against Syrian refugees, it remained largely committed to its original framing. In contrast, the CHP became more radical in its rejection of refugees. The CHP presidential candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu even stressed shortly before election day that, as president, he would expel all Syrian refugees from Turkey, repatriating them back to Syria within two years (Hayatsever 2023).

³ Our findings with respect to party differences are confirmed by a paper published after we completed our study. In December 2022, Evrean Balta, Ezgi Elçi, and Deniz Sert (2022) published a policy report presenting the results of a content analysis of speeches given in the Turkish parliament from 2011 to 2021. The authors surveyed, among other things, “the tone” of each speech, i.e., how anti-immigrant it was. Their results are in line with our findings: AKP and HDP speeches have a more pro-immigrant tone, whereas CHP and MHP take a more anti-immigrant stance.

2. Background of the debate

2.1 Critical discourse moment: The Syrian civil war and the exodus of Syrians to Turkey

The Syrian civil war began in 2011 in the context of the so-called Arab Spring. Just as people in several Arab countries protested against their governments, Syrian citizens protested against the authoritarian regime of President Bashar al-Assad, demanding his resignation and the democratization of Syria. The regime responded to the protests with violence; the demonstrators, in turn, armed themselves, and the government responded with even greater violence. As the conflict progressed, the number of groups seeking to overthrow Assad continued to grow. Ethnic and religious groups saw the unrest and weakness of the government as an opportunity to interfere in the conflict and pursue their own political goals. The Kurds in Northern Syria tried to gain more autonomy; the Islamist Nusra Front perceived a chance to extend their influence and partnered with other opposition groups, and al-Qaeda announced that they planned to create an Islamic State, which included Syria and Iraq. The conflict became increasingly violent and developed into a full-fledged civil war on several fronts, with alliances changing between the different groups. Syria became divided into areas dominated by the various groups involved in the conflict.

From the very beginning, the Syrian civil war was also an international conflict. The United States, the EU, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey sided with the protesters and called for Assad's resignation; Russia and Iran supported the Assad regime. The United States, Turkey, and Russia, in particular, not only supported their respective conflict parties with money and weapons but also entered the conflict militarily. The United States prevented the expansion of the Islamic State to Iraq and Syria with air strikes, and Turkey invaded the Kurdish north of Syria. Russia has become the most heavily involved since 2015 by sending troops to Syria, allowing the Assad regime to increasingly regain territory. According to the United Nations, roughly 306,000 civilians were killed between March 2011, when the conflict began, and 2022 (OHCHR 2023). In total, over 13 million Syrians are on the run as of 2022; 6.8 million are internally displaced, and 6.7 million have left the country and found refuge in other countries (UNHCR 2023).

Syrian refugees began arriving in Turkey in 2011 at the outbreak of the conflict and civil war in Syria, and their numbers have risen steadily ever since. The increase in the number of refugees in Turkey is not linear but fluctuates with the level of intensity and violence of the Syrian civil war. Initially, the legal status of Syrian refugees was unclear due to the fact that, although Turkey had signed the Geneva Refugee Convention, it had only committed to admitting European refugees. In 2013, the Turkish parliament passed the "Law on Foreigners and International Protection" (LFIP), which entered into force in 2014. Since then, all Syrian refugees fall under

the Temporary Protection Regulation (Feyzi et al. 2017). They are allowed to stay in Turkey and have access to healthcare, education, and social assistance. The advantage of the Temporary Protection Regulation for the refugees is certainly that there is no case-by-case examination but also that all Syrian refugees are admitted; the disadvantage is that the government can revoke the protection status at any time (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung 2019). Many refugees from Syria and other countries, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, did not originally intend to stay in Turkey but wanted to migrate from there to one of the more prosperous countries in the EU. To prevent this, the EU signed an agreement with Turkey in March 2016 in which Turkey agreed not to allow refugees into Europe. In return, Turkey receives financial assistance from the EU to provide for the refugees in Turkey.

In the beginning, many Syrian refugees in Turkey lived in camps. In 2013, the government decided that they could settle wherever they wanted. This led people to migrate where they had relatives or thought they could find work. As a result, the distribution of refugees across the country became very asymmetrical. Many refugees live in regions close to the Syrian border or in urban centers, especially Istanbul (Polat & Lowndes 2022; Balta et al. 2022). Syrian refugees have, on average, a lower education level than the Turkish population. Most of them speak Arabic and do not speak Turkish. Almost half are illiterate or have never attended school (Erdoğan 2019: 8). Nearly half of the Syrian refugees are under the age of 18, which poses a big challenge for the Turkish school system. Even though many Syrian refugees go to school, the percentage of those who do not is relatively high due to the financial difficulties that refugee families face, which makes it necessary for children to work. Even though it is a legal requirement that refugees be paid minimum wage, the reality is different. According to Erdoğan (2019), of Syrian refugees that work, more than 95 percent are working informally. Working conditions are often very poor, and pay is below average.

The large number of Syrian refugees, their concentration in certain areas, their low educational level compared to the Turkish population together with the increasingly poor economic situation in Turkey due to the very high inflation rate has contributed to a significant increase in anti-refugee sentiment among the Turkish population as of around 2019. This change in public attitudes is reflected in population surveys but also in violent attacks against Syrian refugees (Tahiroğlu 2022).

2.2 Description of the forum and debates

When the Turkish government committed to an open-door policy toward Syrian refugees in 2011, it was assumed that the number of refugees would be small and their stay in Turkey would be short (Polat 2018). Accordingly, the refugee policy was not widely discussed. Syrians who had passports were given free travel within the country and were mostly provided residence permits, especially those who had relatives

in Turkey. Others were settled in refugee camps that were built first in the border regions of Turkey, then in the border zone in Northern Syria (Erdoğan 2019). Only when the number of refugees increased did the debate on admitting Syrian refugees gain momentum.

Our discourse analysis focuses primarily on debates that took place in the public forum of the parliament, the Grand National Assembly. The analysis covers three legislative cycles. As explained in Chapter 3, our discourse analysis refers to those political parties that have a high standing, that is, parties that are represented in parliament. Since 1982, a party must win at least 10 percent of the votes to be represented in the Turkish parliament (lowered to 7 percent in 2022). During the first cycle (2011 to 2015), three parties were in parliament: Erdoğan's conservative Islamist AKP formed the majority, followed by the Kemalist and social-democratic CHP and the right-wing nationalist MHP. During the second cycle (2015 to 2018), the left-wing and pro-Kurdish HDP was additionally voted into parliament. During the last cycle (2018 to 2023), centrist "The Good Party" (in Turkish, "İyi Parti"; abbreviated as İYİP) also gained seats, so that the Turkish Assembly was composed of five parties. İYİP was founded by former MHP members following MHP's alliance with AKP in 2017 and takes a similar position as the MHP on the refugee issue.

The admission of Syrian refugees forms the broader critical discourse moment of our analysis. With the help of search engines, we selected those parliamentary debates in which admitting Syrian refugees was discussed. In the next step, we excluded more administrative and technical debates and focused on those that both had multiple frames represented and discussed the more fundamental question of whether to accept Syrian refugees. The parliamentary debates we analyzed can be assigned to four more specific critical discourse moments, covering the period from 2013 to 2019.

In April 2013, parties in the Grand National Assembly discussed the "Law on Foreigners and International Protection" (LFIP), which laid out the legal framework for granting temporary protection to Syrian refugees. Although most of the speeches given in parliament were very technical and not rich in frames, two speeches deviated from this pattern, so we have included them in our sample (Hasan Hüseyin Türkoğlu from MHP and Ali Serindağ from CHP).

A second parliamentary debate relevant to our research question took place in March 2016. The opposition parties had introduced a proposal in parliament to form a special commission to investigate the situation of Syrian refugees in Turkey. Two events motivated this request. First, in Istanbul and Ankara, there were a series of terrorist attacks with high fatalities. Although these attacks were not found to be directly related to Syrian refugees, they led to a public debate that questioned Turkey's open border politics. Second, several fatal accidents happened between the Turkish and Greek border that triggered a public debate and increased the visibility of refugees in the public sphere. We included in our sample two speeches of MPs from opposition

parties who spoke in favor of forming an investigative committee (Zühal Topal, MHP and Veli Ağbaba, CHP) as well as a speech of an MP of the governing party (Atay Uslu, AKP) who spoke against it.

A third public debate was triggered by President Erdoğan’s announcement on July 2, 2016, that the government planned to give Syrian refugees Turkish citizenship. The announcement was made in Kilis, close to the Syrian border, during an *iftar* meeting (the breaking of the Ramadan fast) attended by both Syrian refugees and local citizens. Erdoğan’s proposal was discussed in the Grand National Assembly in July 2016. We analyzed Erdoğan’s speech as well as several parliamentary speeches by different MPs (Özkan Yalım, CHP; Aytun Çıray, CHP; Ruhi Ersoy, MHP; Hüda Kaya, HDP; Efkân Ala, Minister of Interior, AKP; Mehmet Erdoğan, AKP).

A fourth parliamentary debate was triggered by İYİP, a party that managed to win parliamentary seats in the general election in 2018 for the first time. İYİP criticized the government’s open border policy and submitted a proposal to establish a commission to address the “problems” caused by Syrian refugees. While representatives of İYİP (İbrahim Halil Oral) and CHP (Gamze Taşcıer) spoke in favor of the proposal, representatives of HDP (Mahmut Toğrul) and AKP (Mehmet Erdoğan) spoke against it.

In addition to parliamentary debates, we considered two other sources of material. Political parties express their views on various social issues in their election programs. Examining the election programs of the parties represented in the Turkish parliament, we included the sections that deal with Syrian refugees in our analysis. Finally, we analyzed two speeches made by President Erdoğan given in the Grand National Assembly at the opening of the new legislative years in 2015 and 2019. Both speeches are taken into consideration as they represent the official position of the government’s refugee policies.

Even though our analyses span a six-year period (2013–19), the basic positions and framing of the various parties have changed little over time. The differences between the various spokespersons of a party are also minor, such that one can speak of a uniform party line, which we present in our discourse analysis below. It should also be noted that we analyze the statements of İYİP and MHP together because both parties have a similar ideological profile and argue similarly.

To validate our findings from the parliamentary debates, we conducted three interviews with representatives of different parties (AKP, HDP, and MHP). We interviewed them about their respective party’s positions and framing on accepting Syrian refugees.

3. The positioning and framing of the AKP government

The Justice and Development Party is a rather young party in the Turkish political landscape. It was founded in 2001 and emerged from the split of the “Islamic Virtue

Party” (in Turkish, “Fazilet Partisi”). Just one year after its founding, AKP won an absolute majority in the 2002 parliamentary election. Since then, the AKP has won all elections and has continuously formed the government.⁴ After the 2002 election, however, Erdoğan, the charismatic leader of the AKP, could not become prime minister because he was barred from parliament due to a lawsuit. Only after a constitutional amendment did he become Turkey’s prime minister starting in 2003. Eleven years later, in 2014, Erdoğan moved from prime minister to president. Three years later, in 2017, a referendum was held on Erdoğan’s initiative to change Turkey’s political system to a presidential one; the referendum was approved by a majority of citizens. In 2018, Erdoğan was elected Turkey’s first president under the new presidential system. He was re-elected in the 2023 election.

The AKP’s policies and ideological orientation have changed dramatically over time (Alaranta 2014: 116). In the beginning, the party promised to democratize and modernize the country, give the Kurds more rights, and push for membership in the EU. And indeed, the curtailment of military power, the rise in GDP per capita and the Human Development Index, as well as the expansion of education in the first ten years of the AKP’s rule can be seen as indicators of Turkey’s successful modernization process. In addition, the Kurds were given more rights, and finally, the AKP maintained Turkey’s Western orientation so that Turkey became a candidate for EU membership (Rabasa & Larrabee 2008). Zeynep N. Kaya & Matthew Whiting (2019) interpret the AKP’s rather liberal and democratic policies in the first phase of its rule as a strategic adaptation to the given circumstances, which masked its actual goals.

When the first refugees from Syria arrived in Turkey, the AKP’s general policy had already changed in several respects. First, the AKP abandoned the secular state that had been in place since Turkey’s inception and began to pursue—very cautiously at the beginning, later more aggressively—an Islamization of various areas of social life (Kaya 2015). Second, with the increasing restriction of democratic rights, such as the freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, and the independence of the judiciary, the increasing expansion of the power of the executive branch of government and especially that of President Erdoğan himself, and the increasing violation of principles of the rule of law, the AKP has pushed Turkey in the direction of an autocracy (Kaya & Whiting 2019).⁵ Third, already deteriorating, the relationship between the Kurds and their political representatives on the one hand and the AKP on the other reached a new low when elected HDP deputies were arrested and remain imprisoned as of publication. Fourth, the AKP effectively abandoned Turkey’s orientation toward the West and its attempt to become a member of the EU, in part as a response to the EU’s criticism of Turkey’s increasing anti-democratic development.

⁴ In the 2018 parliamentary elections, AKP entered into an alliance with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP; Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi) and has since formed the government together with the MHP.

⁵ Central events on this path toward more authoritarianism were state reactions to the so-called Gezi protests in Istanbul and an attempted coup against President Erdoğan in July 2016. Many people protested against the coup; around 250 were killed. In response to the coup, the government declared a state of emergency, arrested many people, dismissed many civil servants, officers, and academics from their jobs, and restricted, even more, freedom of the media and independence of the judiciary. Above all, Erdoğan used the opportunity to transform the political system from parliamentary to presidential.

Instead, AKP foreign policy began to emphasize Turkey’s Ottoman past and to interpret Turkey as a regional power that is “responsible” for developments in the countries that once belonged to the Ottoman Empire.⁶

3.1 Positioning: A policy of open doors

From the very beginning, the AKP government has pursued an open-door policy and admitted all Syrians seeking refuge in Turkey. It is proud of this policy and praises itself for it. This becomes evident in Erdoğan’s opening speech of the new parliamentary term in 2015:

By protecting 2 million of its Syrian and Iraqi brothers for four years, beyond doing its neighborly mission, Turkey has saved the honor of all humanity. Our nation has taught the international community a lesson of humanity by acting with great dedication. On this occasion, here, I would like to express my gratitude for this humanitarian stance that is adopted by our 78 million citizens, all together. (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, AKP, October 1, 2015)

It is important to emphasize that AKP does not refer to refugees as “refugees” or “asylum seekers” but mostly as “guests.” As mentioned, Syrian refugees in Turkey are not covered by the Geneva Refugee Convention. The AKP government never tried to change the legal situation of Syrians in Turkey. Lamis [Abdelaaty \(2021\)](#) argues that the label “guest” is used on purpose, as it gives the government a high degree of flexibility in how refugees can be treated.

Although the general direction of the open-door policy has not changed significantly since the first refugees from Syria arrived in 2011, up to the latest data analyzed in 2022, showing 3.5 million Syrians living in Turkey today, there have been several minor changes over time. While the border between Syria and Turkey was largely uncontrolled, the Turkish government launched the construction of a wall and fence between the two countries in 2015 with the aim of preventing smuggling, illegal migration, and the immigration of possible terrorists. However, these erected barriers did not significantly affect refugees’ opportunities to enter Turkey ([Erdoğan 2019](#)).

In 2016, President Erdoğan announced that Syrian refugees could apply for Turkish citizenship, which actually extended the Turkish open-door policy, even if the possibility of obtaining Turkish citizenship applied only to highly skilled refugees. The justification for granting citizenship to highly skilled refugees was that it would strengthen Turkey’s economy and, at the same time, prevent qualified refugees from migrating from Turkey to wealthy Western countries. About 200,000 refugees from

⁶ This neo-Ottoman ideology (which is named the “Doctrine of Strategic Depth”) was developed by Ahmet Davutoğlu, Erdoğan’s chief foreign policy advisor, who served as minister of foreign affairs and as prime minister before he resigned in 2016 ([Arkan & Kınacıoğlu 2016](#); [Christofis 2018](#)).

Syria have been granted Turkish citizenship (Tahiroğlu 2022: 5), a number that remains rather small relative to the total number of 3.5 million refugees.

Even though Syrian refugees have had only temporary residency status in Turkey, the government had not addressed whether and when the refugees should return to Syria until 2019, after popular support for the open-door policy waned.⁷ In his speech on the opening day of the new legislative year in October 2019, Erdoğan emphasizes again that Syrian refugees are welcome in Turkey, but in addition, he mentions that Turkey is facing challenges that are caused by admitting refugees:

We are, of course, aware of the economic, social, and cultural challenges caused by our 3 million 650 thousand guests who are still living within our borders since the Syrian crisis has prolonged. We also know that there is no other country than Turkey that could carry such a burden and manage it for such a long time. (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, AKP, October 1, 2019)

He concludes that it is now necessary to create safe zones in Syria to which refugees can return:

Our duty is to create as soon as possible a safe environment in which asylum seekers can live their lives in their own country ... At the same time, the terrorist threat originating from Syria to our country has now reached intolerable levels. This situation forced us to secure the Syrian territory ourselves, both for our country and its refugees. (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, AKP, October 1, 2019)

Erdoğan's statement takes place in the context of a Turkish military intervention called "Operation Olive Branch." Turkish troops intervened in Afrin, a Kurdish-controlled area in northwestern Syria, in January 2018. According to the Turkish government, the intervention aimed to drive the Kurdish People's Defense Units ("Yekîneyên Parastina Gel," abbreviated as YPG) out of the area, as the government interprets the YPG as a Kurdish terrorist organization that works together with Kurdistan Workers' Party ("Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê," abbreviated as PKK), and to establish a Turkish-controlled "security zone." The Turkish government's idea was that Syrian refugees should return to the territory occupied by the Turkish military.⁸

In the period between 2019 and 2023, which extends beyond our analysis through 2022, the AKP came under increasing pressure from changing public opinion on the one hand and mobilization processes by opposition parties on the other. As a result, the government increasingly emphasized that it aims to repatriate Syrian refugees. In

⁷ One of the reasons why the AKP began to address the return of Syrian refugees in 2019 is due to the fact that the AKP lost many votes in the 2019 local elections, especially in Istanbul and Ankara. One explanation for this loss is seen as the population's dissatisfaction with the country's continued hosting of the large number of refugees (Erdoğan 2019: 22).

⁸ According to UNHCR, approximately 110,000 refugees returned to Syria from Turkey between 2016 and 2021 (UNHCR 2022). At the same time, however, new Syrian refugees arrived in Turkey. Overall, it seems that the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey did not significantly decrease after 2018 (UNHCR 2023).

May 2022, President Erdoğan announced that his government is working on a new project to ensure the “voluntary” return home of 1 million Syrian refugees in Turkey (Hubbard and Ince 2022). AKP’s adaptation to changing public opinion, however, cannot hide the fact that AKP’s framing of the refugee issue has hardly changed over time. Also, in the 2023 presidential election campaign, opposition parties ran an anti-refugee campaign, while the AKP remained more or less committed to its original framing, which is an indication of the persistence of the cultural repertoires used.

In order to explain AKP’s policy, we argue that one has to understand how the government interprets Turkey’s identity and frames Syrian refugees. We are not the first to analyze the AKP government’s discourse on Syrian refugees; particularly noteworthy are the studies by Rabia Karakaya Polat (2018), Zeynep Yanaşmayan, Ayşen Üstübcü, & Zeynep Kaşlı (2019), Recep Gulmez (2019), and more recently Kerem Morgül (2022).⁹ Our analysis arrives largely at similar results, even though our category system with the distinction between the framing of the “we” and the framing of the “others” is structured differently. In contrast to Polat’s and Morgül’s study, we do not analyze just the government’s framing but also that of the opposition parties.

3.2 Who are “we”? Blurring national boundaries as descendants of the Ottoman Empire and members of the Islamic community

The AKP’s definition of Turkey’s identity consists of three intertwined characteristics.

Blurring the nation-state’s cultural boundary by referring to the Ottoman Empire: Nation-states have borders, and the definition of a nation-state’s identity usually refers to what lies within its borders. The AKP’s framing of Turkey’s identity in the context of the refugee crisis transcends the boundary of Turkey’s nation-state. In a speech delivered in Kilis, a border town with a current population of 80 percent Syrians, President Erdoğan distinguishes between national borders on the one hand and “borders of the heart” on the other. He emphasizes that hearts transcend nation-state borders: “As a country, our official borders are different, and the borders for our hearts are different. The borders of our hearts include everywhere where the ones that we consider as our brothers, the ones that consider us as their brothers, live” (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, AKP, July 2, 2016).

AKP’s reference point of an imagined community goes beyond the present Turkish nation-state by referring to the former territorial boundaries of the Ottoman Empire. In its heyday, the Ottoman Empire, which was founded by Turkish tribes of Anatolia, extended from what is now Turkey to North Africa, the Balkans, Greece, the Middle East (today’s Syria, Iraq, Israel), and the Arabian Peninsula. Sunni Islam was the

⁹ We only came across Kerem Morgül’s excellent study after completing our manuscript. Similar to us, Morgül assumes that the definition of national identity is decisive for a country’s refugee policy; he illustrates this argument with the help of a qualitative content analysis of speeches given by AKP politicians.

official religion of the Ottoman Empire, and Constantinople (Istanbul) became its capital after it was conquered. The Ottoman Empire came to an end after World War I and was replaced by the Turkish Republic and various other successor states.

In its definition of Turkish identity, the AKP refers to the glorious past of the Ottoman Empire. By doing so, the party blurs the nationally defined borders of the modern Turkish Republic and extends the definition of the “we” to include the former subjects of the Ottoman Empire, with whom Turkey shares a common past. The AKP concludes from this definition that Turkey has a special responsibility for the people in the former territory of the Ottoman Empire including those living in countries with whom Turks supposedly share ethnic commonalities:

Dear Deputies, being heirs to an ancient civilization and an accumulated history brings heavy responsibilities besides the great credibility that it provides us. Today, there are hundreds of millions of people in our region and around the world who follow us with their hearts and eyes. Turkey must be interested in the issues of not only its neighbors but also in the issues of its brothers and friends with whom it shares the same history and civilization circle, even if they seem far away from us ... Just as we can't turn our backs on Syria, we can't turn our backs on Palestine, Libya, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Arakan, Turkestan. Just as we can't ignore Iraq or Iran, we can't stay indifferent to any corner of the Asian geography, from Azerbaijan to Kazakhstan, from Uzbekistan to Turkmenistan, from Kyrgyzstan to Crimea. Just as it is our duty to protect the rights of our descendants in Cyprus, Greece, and Bulgaria, we are responsible for perceiving the entire Balkan and European geography with the same view. (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, AKP, October 1, 2019)

Blurring the nation-state's boundary by referring to Islam: The AKP's reference to the community of Islamic brothers and sisters in faith forms a second *cultural frame* of defining Turkish identity that again transcends Turkey's current borders. In the speech given in Kilis in front of many Syrian refugees, Erdoğan compares the citizens of Kilis with the Muslims of Medina who helped Muhammad and his followers during the so-called “hijra.” In the year 622, the Islamic prophet Muhammad and his followers fled persecution in Mecca and made a journey to Medina. The event is called “hijra” in Arabic, which means “migration” and plays a great role in Islamic history, as it is identified as the start of the Islamic calendar. The word “Ansar” is used for the local inhabitants of Medina who welcomed the prophet Muhammad and his followers. Erdoğan parallels the current history with this Islamic history:

Today, as President, on behalf of my nation and all humanity, I would like to express my gratitude to all citizens of Kilis for their sacrifice, for their self-devotion, for their behavior like a real “Ansar.” I would also like to thank our Syrian guests for equating this place with their homelands in their hearts and taking refuge in this country, in this nation, in this city. (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, AKP, July 2, 2016)

His point of reference for defining the boundary that decides who is included and who is excluded is not the nation-state alone but the community of Muslims. This results in the duty to show solidarity with fellow believers living beyond the Turkish nation-state.

Turkey as a regional power and humanitarian actor opposed to the “West”: By referring to the Ottoman Empire, the AKP also shifts Turkey’s position in the geography of *international politics* from the West to the Middle East. As the quote from Erdoğan inserted above makes clear, Turkey sees itself as a regional power that wants to actively influence what happens in the region. According to the AKP’s vision, the country should play the role of a “big brother” in the region (Gulmez 2019). It is able to do so, as Turkey is defined as “an island of trust and stability in a region where instability, conflict, and chaos is increasing” (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, AKP, October 1, 2015). Erdoğan’s self-positioning of Turkey as a regional power is also directed against Syria, with which Turkey has traditionally had a very tense relationship due to territorial and water disputes and Syria’s long support of the Kurdistan Worker’s Party. Even though initially allied to Assad, the Turkish government soon opposed the regime and actively intervened in the Syrian civil war.

At the same time, President Erdoğan and AKP Members of Parliament draw a symbolic boundary between Turkey and the “West,” particularly the EU. They elevate the status of Turkey as a humanitarian actor in international politics in contrast to a “hypocritical West,” which is not only reflected in admitting large numbers of Syrian refugees but also in receiving refugees from other countries. They further underline that Turkey is a world leader in its willingness to help:

Just as Turkey was the place where those who fled Saddam’s persecution in Iraq arrived at that time, Turkey is now the place where those who flee Assad’s persecution would arrive, and we helped these brothers and others in a manner that would represent who we are, with an understanding of helping that ranks 1st in the world when the income per capita is considered, and we are still helping. (Efkan Ala, AKP, July 12, 2016)

The framing of Turkey as a humanitarian country is set in contrast to Western societies and the European Union, which stand for the negative “other” (Polat 2018: 507). The West talks extensively about human rights and humanitarianism yet closes its borders when help is needed, while Turkey is a country that stands by its values:

By protecting 2 million of its Syrian and Iraqi brothers for four years, beyond doing its neighborly mission, Turkey has saved the honor of all humanity. Our nation has taught the international community a lesson of humanity by acting with great dedication . . . We have no right to sentence these brothers to death in the Mediterranean and expose them to persecution at border crossings and train stations, as some European countries do. The word “brother” is not a habit in our mouths but an expression of a feeling that has a thousand-year background in our hearts. (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, AKP, October 1, 2015)

One can understand this self-characterization as a response to the West's increasing criticism of the authoritarian turn taking place in Turkey under the government of Erdoğan. Furthermore, the criticism of Western societies and the EU must be seen in the context of Turkey's accession negotiations with the EU. Turkey has been an accession candidate since 1987. However, negotiations have been halted since 2016, as the EU accuses the AKP government of violating human rights, abrogating the rule of law, and undermining democracy. AKP's criticism of the European refugee policy and the self-description as a humanitarian country can be understood as a tit-for-tat response.

3.3 Who are “they”? Brothers and sisters in need

The dimensions of the AKP's framing of Syrian refugees are largely complementary to the interpretation of Turkish national identity. Three characteristics are of importance.

People in humanitarian need: Syrian refugees are portrayed by the AKP in *moral* terms as people in dire need, fleeing war and the dictatorial Assad regime. The AKP 2015 election program reads, “We open our doors, hearts and tables to our brothers, who experience humanitarian drama, especially in Syria and Iraq” (Election Program, AKP, 2015).

Refugees are portrayed as “oppressed,” “victims,” and “needy.” In his speech, MP Mehmet Erdoğan refers to the current situation in Syria to highlight the humanitarian plight of refugees:

So, what about these people? Where would those civilians go, those who were facing the sarin gases and the barrel bombs that were dropped? ... Sarin gases were fired, the children, other incomers, the traces are still on them. How can we send these people back? Which war are you talking about? Are you talking about sarin gas fired at civilians in Idlib? Is that war? War is not about shooting civilians despicably. (Mehmet Erdoğan, AKP, July 11, 2019)

Refugees as brothers and sisters in faith sharing the same history: AKP's humanitarian-moral view of refugees is further specified by a *religious-cultural* framing. The most common description of refugees found in AKP documents is that of “brothers and sisters.” These attributes portray refugees as very close members of one's own family, which takes away the character of foreignness. Especially in a society where family and family cohesion are considered very important, the description of brothers and sisters implies the desire to stand in solidarity with the refugees and to help them.

The concept of “brothers and sisters” specifies refugees as brothers and sisters in faith and as people sharing the same history and values. Because Syria and Turkey

were both part of the Ottoman Empire in the past, the people of both countries share the same culture, which makes them appear as close relatives:

What is essential to us is our historical past with these brothers, our cultural closeness, our partnership of civilization, and the human values we share. The places we call “Syria and Iraq” today were, for us, the geographies that were not different from Mardin, Diyarbakir, Gaziantep, and Hatay. To see those who live in Syria and Iraq different from our own citizens embarrasses us in the eyes of our history, our ancestors, and especially our martyrs. (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, AKP, October 1, 2015)

The word “martyr” already hints at a second specification of the metaphor “brothers and sisters.” Refugees not only share a common past with Turkish citizens, but they are also brothers and sisters in faith. Erdoğan defines refugees as “Muhajir” that took refuge in Turkey:

All of my Ansar and Muhajir brothers who are now here know very well what homeland means ... Allah promises us, to its servants, that ease will come after every difficulty and no doubt that “Allah is with those who are patient.” We will not grieve, we will never lose hope, we will never give up struggling, we will never abandon prayer. (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, AKP, July 2, 2016)

“Muhajir” describes those people who accompanied the prophet Muhammad in his emigration from Mecca to Medina in 622. As already explained, “Ansar” are the local inhabitants of Medina who took the prophet and his followers into their homes. Erdoğan draws a parallel between the historical solidarity between people of the same faith and the present situation. Most Syrians and Turks are Muslims and are interpreted as closely connected precisely because of this.

Syrians as guests and not as refugees in the legal sense: The framing of refugees manifests itself not only in which characteristics are evoked and emphasized but also in which attributes are not mentioned or even rejected. A remarkable aspect of AKP’s framing of refugees is the *lack of a law-based definition*. Erdoğan and AKP MPs do not use the word “refugee” for Syrians, referring to them mostly as “guests.” The term guest draws attention to the generosity of the hosts but distracts from the fact that refugees have rights, such as long-term residence, currently not granted by the government for strategic reasons ([Abdelaaty 2021](#)).

Finally, even though admitting about 3.5 million Syrian refugees is a big challenge for Turkish institutions and citizens, this issue is hardly ever addressed by the AKP. In response to criticism from opposition parties, the AKP points out that the refugees are not a burden for Turkey. For example, AKP Minister of Interior Efkan Ala rejects the argument made by the opposition parties that refugees are a security

threat: “The crime rate is also less than half of Turkey’s average, friends. I can tell you this now. I mean, the average crime element is quite low” (Efkan Ala, AKP, July 12, 2016).

4. The positioning and framing of the opposition party HDP

Like the AKP, the left-wing opposition party Peoples’ Democratic Party is in favor of accepting Syrian refugees. However, its open refugee policy is justified quite differently and based on a completely different framing of Turkey’s collective identity and Syrian refugees. The HDP was founded in 2012. From the beginning, the HDP was an alliance of two different political groups that joined forces to improve their chances of clearing the 10 percent vote hurdle required to be represented in the Turkish parliament. The core of the HDP represents the interests of the Kurds in Turkey and, accordingly, has more of the profile of an ethnic party. The party added issues of the old and the new left to broaden its profile to increase supporters. The role model for the second stream was the new left parties in other European countries, such as Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece (Kaya 2019). The extent to which this profile expansion was a purely tactical maneuver is unclear (Kaya & Whiting 2019). In any case, the formation of the alliance paid off. The HDP managed to reach the 10 percent threshold in three elections in a row, in June and November 2015 and in June 2018; in the 2018 election, it achieved 11.7 percent of the votes. After the defeated *coup d’état* of 2016, the HDP was increasingly suppressed by the government, even though the HDP condemned the coup. Besides other things, the immunity of MPs was lifted, and many deputies were arrested and are still in prison as of this publication. In the parliamentary election 2023—a time point that lies beyond our period of analysis—HDP opted to run on the list of the “Party of Greens and the Left Future,” as they feared being excluded from the election. The alliance received 8.8 percent of the votes; as the threshold was lowered from 10 to 7 percent, the alliance is represented in parliament with 61 seats including members of the HDP.

The HDP’s program pursues several goals (Kaya 2019; Kaya & Whiting 2019). First, it advocates equal recognition of all minorities. Since the HDP is a Kurdish party, the idea of acknowledging minorities originally referred only to ethnic minorities, but the concept was expanded and applied to other minorities as well, including religious groups, migrants, as well as people with different sexual identities. In addition, special emphasis is given to the equal treatment of women. Second, the party is critical of capitalism and advocates social justice and support for socially disadvantaged groups. Third, the HDP sharply criticizes Turkey’s increasing authoritarianism, advocates the democratization of society from below, and calls for introducing elements of direct democracy. Finally, the party is firmly in favor of peace and against any intervention by a foreign country. This position is clearly directed against

Erdoğan’s foreign policy, in which Turkey sees itself as a new regional power. We see in the next paragraphs how these principles affect HDP’s view of the refugee issue.

4.1 Positioning: Admitting refugees based on the criteria of international law

The HDP welcomes the admission of Syrian refugees. The HDP shares this open-door policy with the AKP and, at the same time, goes beyond the government’s policy in two respects. The HDP wants Syrian refugees to be classified not as guests but recognized as refugees under international law. This would involve lifting the geographic restriction to the Refugee Convention Turkey still keeps in place. Furthermore, according to the HDP, Turkey should be open to all people who are persecuted. As we have seen above, the AKP’s argument for admitting Syrian refugees refers to the fact that they have the same faith as Turks and share the same historical heritage. In contrast, the HDP argues that the obligation to accept refugees applies not only to Syrians but to all persecuted people:

Again, if we return to the issue of Syrian immigrants, being a refugee and having citizenship are also rights, but these are not just for Syrians; for Africans, for the Far East, for the Middle Asians, it is a human right for everyone who has to immigrate to other countries. These cannot be instrumentalized as means of abuse. (Hüda Kaya, HDP, July 12, 2016)

The HDP’s open refugee policy is closely related to the party’s definition of Turkey’s collective identity.

4.2 Who are “we”? A cosmopolitan society committed to international law

Turkey as a multicultural society: While the CHP’s and the MHP’s definition of Turkey’s identity refers to the Kemalist Turkish nation, as we see in the next sections, the HDP’s framing of what makes up Turkey transcends the nation-state container. Indeed, this is also true of the AKP’s notion of Turkey, as we have seen previously. However, while the AKP refers to the Ottoman Empire to define the Turkish collective identity, the HDP follows a rather *multicultural* and cosmopolitan idea. We have to formulate this hypothesis with some reservations because there are only a few statements in the speeches of HDP deputies that refer to the definition of what makes up the Turkish collective identity at all. Among these few is a speech by MP Hüda Kaya, who rejects the idea that Turkey belongs to Turks only. In Kaya’s definition, Turkey is

a multiethnic and multicultural community. From her perspective, the country does not only belong to Turks but to several other groups, including Syrian refugees:

It is at the same level that Turkey belongs to Turkish people as it belongs to Syrians. It is at the same level that Turkey belongs to Turks, as it belongs to Kurds, to Arabs, to Assyrians, to Lazs, and to Armenians. We are all Syrians, we all are immigrants. (Hüda Kaya, HDP, July 12, 2016)

The phrase “We are all Syrians” tears down the symbolic boundary between Turkish citizens on the one hand and immigrants and refugees on the other. This idea of an inclusive Turkish identity also becomes evident in the discussion on whether Syrian refugees should be granted Turkish citizenship. While the AKP government only wants to give Turkish citizenship to highly skilled refugees from Syria, the HDP embraces a more cosmopolitan idea of citizenship. It demands that refugees should be given legal refugee status according to international law. However, if it is foreseeable that refugees will not be able to return to their home country, they should be integrated into Turkish society and have the opportunity to apply for citizenship. The HDP emphasizes that all refugees, independent of their ethnic background, should have the right to apply for Turkish citizenship:

First of all, we need to grant refugee rights to the people coming from Syria. Refugee status means gaining the right to work, residence, education, and health. After that, anyone who desires and has conditions should be able to become a citizen of the Republic of Turkey. Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan, Pakistani, Somali, whoever has come to our country. Our country is also their homeland. (Selahattin Demirtaş, HDP, July 2016)¹⁰

The proposal to grant all refugees Turkish citizenship puts Turkish citizens and refugees on an equal footing and calls into question a key principle of Turkish nationalism by replacing it with a cosmopolitan notion of identity.

Turkey as a country that should be committed to international law: While the AKP considers refugees as guests and grants them temporary residence status, the HDP uses a *legal framing* and justifies its open-door policy with reference to international refugee law. The 2015 election program states, with regard to refugees and migrants, “The right to life and work is the most basic human right” (Election Program, HDP, 2015). All HDP speakers criticize Turkey for limiting the Geneva Refugee Convention to European refugees only: “The AKP describes refugees as ‘guests.’ It does not fulfill its national/international responsibilities and denies the rights of refugees. The Temporary Protection Regime is not in line with international norms” (Election Program, HDP, 2018).

¹⁰ The quote is from a public statement by the former HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş and is not part of the parliamentary debates we analyzed.

Accordingly, the HDP’s election program promises: “Therefore, first of all, the refugee status will be changed by the removal of the ‘geographical limitation’ reservation put on the Geneva Convention” (Election Program, HDP, 2015).

Behind this specific demand lies a certain idea of how the HDP envisions Turkey: The country should be integrated into an international legal order. This legal order is determined by human rights, including refugee rights. Having Turkey comply with international law would also curtail the government’s power.

4.3 Who are “they”? People in need and exploited but entitled to rights

People in need: Refugees are interpreted first and foremost from a *moral* perspective. They are portrayed as people who are in the greatest need and whose lives are threatened:

I ask you to imagine that a war has been going on in your country for five years. Some of you have been detained by men from ISIS, some of your daughters have been taken away from you, or maybe you have immigrated to Turkey with the rest of your family. In fact, none of us can imagine this. (Filiz Kerestecioğlu, HDP, March 22, 2016)

Refugees’ misery described in HDP’s speeches refers not only to the country from which the refugees had to flee but also to the flight itself and the hardship in the host countries. Their suffering is not only described in the abstract but illustrated with individual examples. For example, in his speech, MP Altan Tan refers to Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old refugee boy found dead on a Turkish beach after the boat he was traveling on to Greece capsized: “Believe me, friends, there are thousands of Alan Kurdis whose pictures are not captured, who don’t take place in the magazine, they die every day” (Altan Tan, HDP, December 23, 2015).

When describing the hardships suffered by refugees, the HDP places a special emphasis on the plight of women:

Syrian refugee women say that they had to stay awake for days to not be raped or harassed. They say that this violence has also been carried out by the police and the people who are working there in the immigration field, and they also talk about people smugglers who were negotiating sexual relations with them. For women, war does not only mean death, but it also means sexual violence and rape. (Filiz Kerestecioğlu, HDP, March 22, 2016)

At a later point in the speech, Deputy Filiz Kerestecioğlu emphasizes another form of sexual violence against women: “Another form of sexual violence is polygamous marriages. Young women and children between the ages of 15 and 25 who are lonely or whose families are struggling financially are forced into sex work again after

being persuaded to enter into a polygamous marriage. This is very common” (Filiz Kerestecioğlu, HDP, March 22, 2016).

Refugees as exploited labor force: Refugees are interpreted not only from a moral but also from an *economic* perspective. While deputies of the Kemalist CHP and nationalist MHP interpret refugees as an economic threat to the native Turkish population, as we see in the next sections, the HDP frames refugees the other way around. The refugees are the ones who are exploited:

In other words, the poverty of Syrians ... unfortunately became the richness of the capitalist who is looking for cheap labor. I mean, the real burden is on the backs of refugees, especially on the women. In textile workshops, women work twelve hours a day for 600 Lira. Moreover, many Syrian women workers say that their bosses have harassed them. (Filiz Kerestecioğlu, HDP, March 22, 2016)

Entitled to the legal status of being a refugee: Finally, the HDP believes that the reason that refugees are in such a bad situation in Turkey is due to the fact that they are tolerated as guests only. From the HDP’s point of view, Syrians in Turkey have the right to be classified and treated as refugees under international law (Election Program, HDP, 2018). The AKP government’s discourse of calling refugees guests is, in the HDP’s view, an attempt to arbitrarily decide on refugees and not to recognize that refugees have rights that Turkey must respect.

5. The positioning and framing of the opposition party CHP

In contrast to the ruling AKP and the HDP, as one of the opposition parties, the Republican People’s Party takes a more skeptical stance toward admitting Syrian refugees, which is strongly related to the party’s specific framing of Turkish identity and Syrian refugees. CHP is the strongest opposition party in the Turkish parliament. It is the oldest party in Turkey and was founded by the first president, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. CHP was the only existing Turkish party until 1945 and closely intertwined with the state (Alaranta 2014). It was responsible for the institutionalization of the key features of a new Turkish nation-state founded in 1923, consisting of the following elements: first, separation of the new Turkish nation-state from the Ottoman Empire by abolishing the Sultanate and the Caliphate; second, institutionalization of a strictly secular society; e.g., the Sharia were abolished, and wearing a veil was banned; third, Westernization and modernization of Turkey (e.g., introduction of the Latin alphabet, adoption of the Western legal system, women were given the right to vote, coeducation was introduced); and fourth, the attempt to develop a strong national identity.

After 1945, the CHP introduced a multiparty system in Turkey and democratized itself. Some of the core principles have remained constitutive features of the CHP’s ideological orientation to this day. These include the strict separation of state

and society on the one hand and religion on the other (secularism); an orientation toward modern, Western societies; and a version of nationalism that can be described as territorial nationalism, as it refers to the Turkish Republic rather than to historical predecessors or religious and ethnic characteristics (Uzer 2011; Alaranta 2014).

5.1 Positioning: Admitting refugees comes with many problems

CHP’s position on the issue of accepting refugees from Syria was rather ambivalent at first but increasingly turned against Syrian refugees over time. On the one hand, some MPs acknowledge that Syrian refugees should be admitted: “Let’s say this: If there are people who seek refuge in our country, if there are people coming to our country, of course, we will extend our hand of humanity—there is no doubt about it” (Ali Serindağ, CHP, April 4, 2013). And in its election program of 2015, the CHP states: “We will regularly host our brothers and sisters who have taken refuge in our country due to the war in Syria in decent conditions” (Election Program, CHP, 2015).

On the other hand, however, statements supporting the admission of Syrian refugees are relatively rare and do not play a major role in CHP speeches. In contrast to the few positive statements, one finds many statements that refer to the problems associated with refugees. As we see in the next section, Syrian refugees are interpreted primarily as a burden to Turkey, and in more ways than one.

Already in the first debate, CHP Deputy Ali Serindağ emphasizes that the government should primarily be concerned about the underlying causes of the flight; if the causes were eliminated, Turkey would not have to accept refugees:

We are discussing foreign migration here; both domestic migration and foreign migration are affected by certain factors. What should be done? We need to reduce those factors. So, the imbalance between the countries needs to be addressed. You cannot prevent foreign migration as long as there is such a difference in development between the countries. (Ali Serindağ, CHP, April 4, 2013)

MP Gamze Taşçier makes a similar argument in her 2019 speech. She blames the AKP’s foreign policy for the fact that so many Syrian refugees are in Turkey: “In order to solve the problems experienced and caused by Syrian asylum seekers in our country, we first need to determine the basis for the problem. The reason for Syrians being in Turkey is the wrong foreign policy pursued by the AKP government so far” (Gamze Taşçier, CHP, June 11, 2019).

Looking at the CHP’s various statements together, it becomes clear that at its core, it views refugees very skeptically and is (indirectly) opposed to accepting them.

5.2 Who are “we”? Heirs of the Kemalist principles of 1923

CHP’s framing of Turkish identity is largely a rejection of AKP’s proposals. CHP profiles its own conception of Turkey by referring to the central features of Kemalism.

Rejection of AKP’s extended conception of Turkey and referring to Turkey in the borders of 1923: We have seen that the AKP refers to the Ottoman Empire in its definition of Turkish identity and thus expands the symbolic boundaries of present Turkey. The CHP rejects this conception of Turkey. MP Ali Serindağ interprets AKP’s framing as backward-looking. “Dear friends, you’re going back, not going forward” (Ali Serindağ, April 4, 2013). He reminds the AKP that the Ottoman Empire collapsed many years ago: “What is this imperial reflex? For God’s sake, have you thought about it? The Ottoman Empire fell into a period of decline after the Treaty of Karlofça in 1699. All right? It declined” (Ali Serindağ, CHP, April 4, 2013).

Serindağ implicitly defines Turkey in terms of its Kemalist and Republican heritage. In contrast to the AKP, which mobilizes a common Ottoman past to include Syrians within the “we,” Serindağ draws a cultural boundary between the Turkish nation and its neighbors. Turkish identity is defined with reference to the citizens of the Republic of Turkey, excluding foreigners.

Belonging to the Occident and not to the Orient: A second feature in framing the “we,” closely related to the first, is that the CHP assigns Turkey to the West. Such an assignment in the *international order* and geostrategic landscape is, in turn, accompanied by a critique of the AKP’s neo-Ottoman foreign policy, which sees Turkey as a regional power and has shifted its center of attention toward the East. The East, and especially the Middle East, is portrayed by the CHP as conflictual, unstable, and rather chaotic:

There was the idiom “like the Middle East” in the world, and now Turkey has entered into this statement. Look, in the past, when you referred to the Middle East, bombs would come to mind; Beirut used to come to mind when it was said the Middle East, and Baghdad used to come to mind. Dear friends, now Ankara comes to mind when the Middle East is said. (Veli Ağbaba, CHP, March 22, 2016)

We said don’t drag Turkey into this swamp in the Middle East ... Unfortunately, the AKP pursued sectarian politics in the Middle East and had no relations with any country anymore, and unfortunately, now Turkey has become a country that all the terror groups of the Middle East pass through. (Gamze Taşçier, CHP, June 11, 2019)

Even though the CHP criticizes the West—and especially the EU for taking in so few refugees and thus leaving Turkey alone to solve the problem—it is clear that the CHP sees Turkey as part of Europe and wants Turkey to follow the legacy of the Kemalist foreign policy of the early years of the Republic.

Turkey’s economy is too weak to admit so many refugees: Representatives of the CHP portray Turkey as a country struggling with *economic* problems that does not

have the capacity to accept so many refugees. Unemployment was already a serious problem for Turkish citizens; with the arrival of Syrian refugees, the situation became worse: “The unemployment rate in Gaziantep is 16.8%, according to the figures of TÜİK.¹¹ We can’t provide them with employment opportunities, we can’t employ them, we can’t provide them jobs; in addition, the Syrians have come to us” (Ali Serindağ, CHP, April 4, 2013).

The housing shortage is another issue that the CHP puts on the agenda. The party sharply criticizes the AKP for allowing Syrian refugees access to housing, thus disadvantaging Turkish citizens:

Dear President of the Republic, you say that ... “We will give houses from TOKİ¹² to the ones who are coming from Syria.” Oh, President of the Republic! My citizens of the Republic of Turkey have no home; hundreds of thousands of people do not have a home. Give the free houses in the stock of TOKİ to our citizens in the first place. (Özkan Yalım, CHP, July 12, 2016)

From the CHP’s point of view, the government should be concerned primarily with the welfare of its own citizens. They argue that supporting its citizens is especially important as they and the country are already struggling with major economic problems.

5.3 Who are “they”? Unwelcome guests

Unlike the government, the CHP portrays Syrian refugees in a rather poor light. Although a few statements refer to the plight of Syrians, the focus is more on framing refugees as a burden and, in part, a threat to Turkey and Turkish citizens. Whereas both the framing of the AKP and the HDP includes refugees in the community and blurs the boundary between “us” and “them,” the CHP’s framing draws a clear line between Turkish citizens and Syrian refugees.

Are these really refugees? Some CHP deputies ask whether the refugees are, in all cases, people who are really in need and on the run. The issue at stake is that Turkey does not know whether these people are genuine refugees or whether they are coming to Turkey for other reasons. The rhetorical question is used to challenge the *legal* status of refugees:

I mean, I repeat, nearly 100,000 people come here claiming to have fled the war environment, and those people are going back before the environment there becomes stable, and even on the contrary, when the violent environment there is getting more and more severe. Why? That means they didn’t just run away from the violence. We also don’t know where they came from. They say, “We came from

¹¹ “Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu” (Turkish Statistical Institute).

¹² “Toplu Konut İdaresi Başkanlığı” (Mass Housing Development Administration).

Syria.” How can we know that they are actually coming from Syria? We don’t know because we decide according to their statement. (Ali Serindağ, CHP, April 4, 2013)

Refugees as an economic threat: Some CHP statements portray Syrian refugees as an *economic* threat as they compete with the local population in the already tight labor market. In response to Erdoğan’s proposal to grant Syrian refugees Turkish citizenship, CHP MP Özkan Yalın points out that Syrian refugees are low-skilled and accordingly represent an economic burden for Turkey:

You’re saying, Mr. President of the Republic is exactly saying, “The people who came are very cultured and so on.” Look, I’ll again give you an example from the reports of AFAD¹³: 23% of the people who came—look, I specifically highlight it—are not even literate, 27% are primary school graduates, about 50% are either elementary school graduates or illiterate, 28% are secondary school graduates, 15% are high school graduates, and only 7% are university graduates. (Özkan Yalın, CHP, July 12, 2016)

In the speaker’s view, Turkey does not need qualified refugees either, as enough Turks are waiting for work: “We don’t need a worker or an officer or college-educated person; we have so many, more than 600,000 university graduate teachers who are waiting for an assignment, so many of our doctors are waiting for an assignment, so many of our engineers are waiting for an assignment” (Özkan Yalın, CHP, July 12, 2016).

Refugees as a security threat: Syrian refugees are also framed in *security* terms and interpreted as a threat to Turkey’s security. In the debate just quoted, the CHP deputy portrays refugees as potential terrorists:

But let’s see first what the people who wanted to be granted citizenship have done so far: It was the Syrians who killed a landlord in Antep a few months ago; don’t forget that. Likewise, two or three days ago, when setting up a bomb device in Hatay Reyhanlı, when preparing a bomb device, it was the Syrians who exploded and killed themselves, and worst of all, the AFAD card was found in their pockets. Likewise, I continue, two days ago, Saturday night in Konya, Beyşehir, unfortunately, a young man of us was killed, unfortunately again by the Syrians. Let’s continue: 44 of our citizens were killed at Atatürk Airport, again caused by people who came from Syria. (Özkan Yalın, CHP, July 12, 2016)

Refugees as a cultural threat: Finally, the inflow of Syrian refugees is defined as a *cultural* problem. Ali Serindağ subtly warns of the Arabization of Turkey through a large percentage of Syrian refugees when he argues that “in Kilis, there are more Syrians in Kilis than the Kilis population. All the signboards are in Arabic” (Ali Serindağ, CHP, April 4, 2013). And MP Aytun Cıray describes refugees as religious fanatics who do

¹³ “Afet ve Acil Durum Yönetimi Başkanlığı” (Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency).

not fit with Turkey’s secular orientation:¹⁴ “Syrians’ religious fanaticism trends will completely destroy the secularism of Turkey, which has already been stretched day by day, and you will bring people against each other” (Aytun Çıray, CHP, July 12, 2016).

CHP’s interpretation of Syrian refugees as an economic burden, a security risk, and a cultural threat gained significance in the period following our analysis leading up to the 2023 presidential election, as two more recent policy reports demonstrate (Tahiroğlu 2022; Balta et al. 2022).

6. The positioning and framing of the opposition party MHP

Similar to the CHP, the Nationalist Movement Party also takes a skeptical stance toward Syrian refugees. The MHP was founded in 1969. It emerged from a criticism of the CHP, which was accused of straying too far from Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s ideas of a modern Turkey. The party’s history is quite muddled. Some observers classify the former MHP as a neofascist party with close ties to militant groups such as the Grey Wolves. The party has repeatedly changed its political orientation throughout its history (e.g., on Turkey’s membership in the EU). In recent years, the MHP has become slightly more moderate. However, some principles remain constitutive for the party today. We primarily focus on those features that are important for understanding the MHP’s refugee policy.

The MHP is, first and foremost, an ethnic nationalist party that glorifies Turkey and its citizens and places national identity above all else (Bora 2011: 73–77). The first sentence of the party’s mission statement reads: “Our mission is to secure the unity and integrity, rights and interests of the state and the nation; to protect the national and moral values as well as history and cultural wealth of the great Turkish nation” (MHP 2022). The MHP shares its nationalist orientation with the CHP, although nationalism is more pronounced in the MHP and relates primarily to an ethnic understanding of the nation (Uzer 2011). The emphasis on nationalism and ethnic national identity also applies to a particular aspect of the MHP’s foreign policy. The world order is understood as consisting of various nation-states, each defined by a national ethnic community. The MHP opposes intermingling people with different ethnic backgrounds. However, they believe that if members of one’s own nation live in another country, then the home country has an obligation to take care of them. This obligation extends, for example, to the Turkish minorities in Bulgaria or Syria.

The flip side of MHP’s nationalism is its strict rejection of the self-determination of minorities living within a nation. The MHP’s main focus here is on the Kurds

¹⁴ There is an additional argument in the debate as to why CHP MPs express skepticism about Syrian refugees. They fear that if refugees are granted Turkish citizenship, they will vote for the AKP and thus weaken the CHP: “There are currently about 3–4 million Syrian citizens who are our guests, and around 2 to 3 million of them are adults who will be able to vote since they are over the age of 18. These guests are asked to be granted citizenship of the Republic of Turkey to increase votes of AKP government and Mr. President.” (Özkan Yalım, CHP, July 12, 2016).

striving for greater independence, which the party strictly rejects. Accordingly, the MHP has strongly condemned the negotiations the AKP has conducted with the Kurds. It also follows from the nationalist orientation and the rejection of the Kurds' self-determination that the HDP is the party in the Turkish parliament most strongly opposed by the MHP.

The MHP shares with the CHP a nationalist orientation and a reference to the founding principles of present-day Turkey in 1923. However, while the CHP favors a territorial and more civic-based version of nationalism, the MHP supports more of an ethnic variant of nationalism (Uzer 2011). Furthermore, the demarcation from the Kemalist CHP results primarily from the fact that the MHP has turned away from a strictly secular orientation. Although the MHP continues to emphasize secularism in its party program, it has opened to Islam in its concrete policies. For example, the MHP supported the AKP in abolishing the ban on headscarves at Turkish universities.

Until 2018, the MHP was in opposition to the ruling AKP party. Since then, it has been part of an alliance with the AKP called the "People's Alliance," having already supported Erdoğan's transformation of Turkey from a parliamentary to a presidential system in 2017. The fact that the MHP has supported the AKP government since 2018 has had an impact on its position on Syrian refugees. While the MHP initially criticized the AKP for its refugee policy, it has become more silent since the alliance (Eskisar & Durmuslar 2023). Our analysis focuses primarily on the period when the MHP did not yet support the AKP. Furthermore, we include statements by İYİP, as that party split from the MHP after the latter's alliance with AKP but remains ideologically rather close.

6.1 Positioning: Repatriation as quickly as possible

Especially at the beginning of the debate, the MHP takes an ambivalent position on the admission of Syrian refugees, which, however, becomes more skeptical over time. On the one hand, the party emphasizes that Turkey should accept refugees for humanitarian reasons. For example, the 2015 election program states: "Our party believes that Turkey should help every human being in Iraq and Syria who are impacted by the cruelty of war, regardless of belonging and identity" (Election Program, MHP, 2015). At the same time, the MHP interprets Syrian refugee admission as a major economic and social burden for Turkey, as we see when we describe the MHP's framing of refugees. Consequently, the MHP emphasizes from the very beginning that the stay of Syrian refugees in Turkey can only be temporary. Its 2015 election program states: "Returning Iraqi and Syrian refugees to their homeland in a healthy way will form the basis of our policy on this issue" (Election Program, MHP, 2015).

Similar statements can be found in MP speeches given in parliament:

Just like it was ordinary and necessary that we welcome and help those who have sought refuge in our country because they were fleeing war, it is equally important

that we want the war to end and they return to their homeland, and we do our best for this purpose. (Halil İbrahim Oral, İYİP, June 11, 2019)

The issue of repatriating Syrian refugees has become increasingly important for the MHP. Despite this more general skepticism toward Syrian refugees, the MHP is much more open-minded about one specific group of refugees, namely ethnic Turks. This attitude closely relates to MHP’s framing of Turkish identity.

6.2 Who are “we”? A nation in ethnic terms

The MHP’s idea that Syrian refugees are guests who should return to Syria as soon as possible is related to MHP’s *cultural* definition of Turkish identity as an ethnic community. In contrast to the AKP, whose members refer to Turkey’s Ottoman past, the MHP has a more restricted idea of the “we” by defining the “Turkish homeland” as that to which all ethnic Turks belong. The MHP shares this nationalist orientation with the CHP but defines Turkish identity more strongly in terms of ethnicity. MHP is the Turkish party that most often refers to the Turkish nation in its speeches and praises it, even though this may not fit the topic of the debate in parliament. For instance, MP Hasan Hüseyin Türkoğlu starts his speech by saluting “the esteemed deputies of the Turkish nation.” And he continues with a brief definition of Turkish nationalism:

Turkish nationalists have a unifying understanding that embraces all sub-identities that form the Turkish nation, such as Turkmen, Kurdish, Laz, Circassian, Abaza, and so on. Turkish nationalists are those who describe the Turkish nation as “a community of people who have a common history and a common consciousness of history, who belong to the same religion, who have established and made live the same state, and today lives within the borders of the same state.” (Hasan Hüseyin Türkoğlu, MHP, March 20, 2013)

From the MHP’s point of view, the main enemy of the Turkish nation is ethnic groups that want to break away from the nation. In the MHP’s view, it is, above all, the Kurds who pose a threat to Turkey’s identity. Accordingly, the MHP criticizes the ruling AKP for its negotiations with the Kurds.

The ethnic character of the MHP’s conception of nationhood becomes clear when considering how the party compares Syrians to other groups. MP Ruhi Erso compares the Syrians with immigrants who migrated to Turkey from other successor states of the Ottoman Empire, such as members of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria or the Muslims who came to Turkey during the Balkan Wars. In his view, these groups are ethnic Turks, who accordingly have the right not only to come to Turkey but also to receive Turkish citizenship. The majority of Syrians do not belong to this group. They have their own ethnic identity, which is not so easily compatible with that of the Turks:

Let's not forget that the migrations to Anatolia in the last period of the Ottoman Empire and Syrian refugees are not identical to each other and cannot be compared. Those who came when the Empire collapsed did not change citizenships; they only moved within the state where they were already citizens. They had no other identities in their minds. (Ruhi Ersoy, MHP, July 12, 2016)

The MHP's emphasis on Turkish nationalism and the boundary marked against other ethnic groups also shapes its view of the Syrian civil war. The MHP does not share the view that the protests against the Assad regime can be interpreted as a striving for more democracy. From the MHP's perspective, it is an attempt by individual ethnic groups to gain greater independence:

Syria's civil war is not a struggle for democracy and freedom. The civil war in Syria is a project for a state that is dreamed of to be established by the provocation of an ethnic group, just as it had been in Iraq, first by the emergence of regional structures, then federative structures, and then with the parts that will be taken from Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Turkey. (Hasan Hüseyin Türkoğlu, MHP, March 20, 2013)

This quote refers particularly to Kurds. The MHP fears Syrian Kurds want to join forces with the Kurds in Turkey and establish their own state, which would endanger Turkey's national identity. The fact that Turkish identity is defined primarily in ethnic terms also influences the framing of Syrian refugees.

6.3 Who are “they”? Guests and a burden

The portrayal of refugees in MHP's documents hardly differs from the CHP. Here, too, we find an initial understanding of the humanitarian emergency in which Syrian refugees have been placed. In the election programs of 2015 and 2018, as well as in some speeches of the Members of Parliament, refugees are defined as people whose lives are threatened and who have had to leave their country because of this danger. However, the humanitarian framing is not elaborated further, nor is it illustrated by accounts of individual stories of suffering. Instead, the discourse focuses mainly on describing refugees as ethnically distant and a burden and threat to Turkey.

Syrians as ethnic others and preference for Turkmen: In line with the ethnic definition of Turkey's national identity, the MHP considers Syrian refugees as ethnic “others” and incompatible with the Turkish nation. However, there is a group of Syrian refugees that the MHP believes belong to Turkey (Gulmez 2019). On the border with Turkey live so-called Syrian Turkmen, who migrated from Anatolia to present-day Syria during the Ottoman Empire and speak Turkish. The MHP pays special attention to them; from the MHP's point of view, they belong to the Turkish nation: “I hope the problems that the Turkmen presence in Syria face will not be like the ones faced by Turkmen in Iraq, and this time, the government will take care

of these brothers” (Hasan Hüseyin Türkoğlu, MHP, March 20, 2013). The example illustrates that the MHP is not against the admission of immigrants and refugees in principle; ethnically similar persons are welcome.

Refugees as an economic burden: Refugees are interpreted as a quantitative burden. To illustrate this, MP Zühal Topçu compares the number of refugees in Turkey to the population size of other countries:

Don't underestimate this community: 3 million. I'd like to make some comparisons to you again. I would like to list countries from the European Union with a population of less than 3 million: Lithuania, Albania, Slovenia, Macedonia, Estonia, and Latvia have populations less than 3 million. (Zühal Topçu, MHP, March 22, 2016)

From the MHP's point of view, the large number of refugees is a burden for Turkey and its citizens, mostly in economic terms. Refugees cost the Turkish state money that it could use for other projects, asserts the MHP: “Asylum seekers constitute a serious financial burden for our state” (Hasan Hüseyin Türkoğlu, MHP, March 20, 2013). Furthermore, refugees are portrayed as competitors of Turkish citizens in the labor market: “The fact that refugees are cheap labor forces has affected our citizens who are already struggling with unemployment in border provinces” (Hasan Hüseyin Türkoğlu, MHP, March 20, 2013).

Refugees as a security risk: Finally, refugees are framed in *security* terms: “In addition to the high economic cost caused by the presence of a significant number of refugees in our country, Turkey faces important social problems such as theft in the cities, robbery, rebellion, begging, the spread of epidemic diseases, drug use, prostitution, child marriage, illegal labor, uncontrolled rent increase” (Election Program, MHP, 2015).¹⁵

In addition, and similar to the CHP, the MHP argues that with an open-border policy, possible terrorists may have entered Turkey: “Mr. President, dear Deputies, along with Syrian asylum seekers, al-Muhaberat, Daesh, PKK, and many terrorist organizations and intelligence agencies have leaked into our country” (Halil İbrahim Oral, İYİP, June 11, 2019).

From a security perspective, the admission of refugees is also seen as posing new health risks: “Infectious diseases have also come with asylum seekers. Diseases that were not on the agenda anymore, such as measles and tuberculosis, have led to risk and panic. Private and public hospitals have been in large depths because of asylum seekers' healthcare expenses” (Hasan Hüseyin Türkoğlu, MHP, March 20, 2013).

Although the MHP recognizes the emergency of the refugees, it emphasizes, above all, the multitude of problems that the refugees pose for Turkish citizens. With this framing, the MHP marks a boundary between Turks on the one hand and Syrians on the other, the latter of whom may have guest status in Turkey but should return to Syria as soon as possible.

¹⁵ The nearly identical phrase can be found in the 2018 election program.

7. Summary and accounting for differences between political parties

Table 4.1 summarizes the results of our frame analysis. It shows how the four parties differ in their refugee policies and how this relates to their definition of national identity and framing of refugees. Two camps can be distinguished. Both the right-wing populist ruling party AKP, led by President Erdoğan, and the ideologically quite different HDP, which represents the interests of the Kurds and belongs to the new left, favor an open-door policy. Both parties undermine the traditional Kemalist notion of national identity. But they do so with very different arguments and using different frames. The AKP blurs the nationally defined boundaries of the modern Turkish Republic by including the former subjects of the Ottoman Empire, with whom Turkey shares a common past and a common religion. On this basis, the AKP defines Turkey as a regional power that feels “responsible” for what happens in the neighboring countries. Following this framing of the “we,” Syrian refugees are portrayed as brothers and sisters sharing the same history and faith. However, Syrians are not defined as “refugees” under international law, with the corresponding rights, but as “guests,” which suggests that Turkey is acting out of a sense of hospitality and not under a legal obligation.

Like the AKP, the HDP challenges the notion of a unitary Turkish nation-state. It promotes instead a definition of Turkey as a multiethnic state, which includes everyone living within its boundaries regardless of ethnic affiliation and nationality. The HDP imagines Turkey as a country committed to universal human rights and international law. In HDP’s view, Syrians are not guests, but they should have the status of refugees according to international law, which would make them independent from arbitrary decisions by the government and protect them from being exploited in Turkey.

The HDP’s and AKP’s open admission policies are challenged by the Kemalist CHP and the nationalist MHP, at least until 2018, when the MHP began supporting the AKP government. Although Syrian refugees are seen as people who are in humanitarian need, they are interpreted as an economic burden, a cultural and security threat, and unwelcome guests. This policy position is related to how the two parties frame Turkish identity. Both favor a nationalist idea of Turkish identity, with slight differences between the two parties. In the case of the CHP, the reference point of national identity is the Kemalist founding myth of a secular civic nation; in the case of the MHP, nationalism means, above all, ethnic nationalism. Both conceptions lead to similar but not identical conclusions. The task of the state should be primarily to provide for the welfare of its own citizens; this is particularly true at a time when Turkey is struggling economically. Against this background, Syrian refugees are interpreted as an economic and cultural burden and a security risk. However, the MHP additionally emphasizes solidarity with those immigrants who are ethnically similar to Turks, like the Turkmen from Syria, while conversely, it excludes those who are ethnically different, like the Kurds.

Table 4.1 Positionings and framings in the debate on the admission of refugees in Turkey

	AKP		HDP		CHP		MHP	
Policy position	Admission of Syrian refugees as guests		Admission of all refugees and granting them refugee status according to international law		Increasingly negative stance toward admitting refugees		(1) Skeptical stance toward admitting refugees. (2) Preference for ethnically similar refugees	
Framing	Who are “we”?	Who are “they”?	Who are “we”?	Who are “they”?	Who are “we”?	Who are “they”?	Who are “we”?	Who are “they”?
Cultural	Turkey’s identity transcends the boundaries of the Turkish nation-state as it is an Islamic country, with roots that lie in the Ottoman Empire	Syrian refugees are Muslims as Turks are; they have similar historical roots as Turks as both belonged to the Ottoman Empire	Turkey as a multicultural country open to all social groups	—	Rejection of AKP’s extended conception of Turkey and reference to the Kemalist Turkish Republic	Refugees as a cultural threat	Turkey as an ethnically defined nation	Syrian refugees (exception Turkmen) as ethnically different
International	(1) Turkey is a regional power in the Middle East (2) Turkey is a humanitarian actor in contrast to the hypocritical “West”	—	—	—	Turkey belongs to the “West”	—	—	—

Continued

Table 4.1 *Continued*

	AKP		HDP		CHP		MHP	
Policy position	Admission of Syrian refugees as guests		Admission of all refugees and granting them refugee status according to international law		Increasingly negative stance toward admitting refugees		(1) Skeptical stance toward admitting refugees. (2) Preference for ethnically similar refugees	
Framing	Who are “we”?	Who are “they”?	Who are “we”?	Who are “they”?	Who are “we”?	Who are “they”?	Who are “we”?	Who are “they”?
Moral	—	Refugees are people in need escaping a civil war	—	Refugees are people in existential need	—	Refugees are people in need (however, this framing element is not very significant)	—	Refugees are people in need (however, this framing element is not very significant)
Legal	—	Syrians are guests but not refugees under international law	Turkey should be committed to international law and humanitarian principles	Refugees should be treated as refugees according to international law and not as guests	—	Some of the Syrian refugees are “normal” migrants, but not refugees	—	—
Economic	—	—	—	Refugees as people who are economically exploited	Turkey is (already) facing economic problems	Refugees as an economic threat	—	Refugees as an economic burden to Turkey
Security	—	—	—	—	—	Refugees as a security threat	—	Refugees as a security threat

How do our findings relate to the expectations arising from the theory of political cleavages? As explained in [Chapter 2](#), cleavage theory assumes that the issue of admitting refugees and immigrants is mainly put on the political agenda by populist right-wing parties who oppose admitting immigrants by framing migration as a cultural threat to the nation’s integrity. In contrast, new left parties frame immigration in terms of universalistic values and multiculturalism and thus advocate for more open border policies. The Turkish case only fits partially into this expected cleavage pattern. Certainly, the HDP can be interpreted as a party of the new left that advocates an open refugee policy based on its cosmopolitan and human rights-based framing of Turkish identity and the refugees. With their nationalist orientation, the MHP also fits the expectations that can be derived from the cleavage theory, as the party favors an ethnic-nationalist idea of Turkish identity and, on this basis, draws a line between Turkish citizens on the one hand and refugees on the other.

However, neither the CHP nor, above all, the ruling AKP fit into the theoretically expected picture. While many other social democratic parties have a cosmopolitan orientation and pursue more refugee-friendly policies, the CHP has a secular and nationalist orientation and a skeptical stance toward Syrian refugees. The party is primarily concerned that the large number of Syrian refugees will economically disadvantage Turkish citizens, especially those from lower social classes. But the deviation from the theoretical expectation applies primarily to the AKP. As a right-wing populist party, the AKP supports the admission of refugees and, in this respect, does not constitute the theoretically expected counterpole to the cosmopolitan camp. This deviation is the result of the fact that the AKP has broken with some of the basic principles of the Kemalist revolution that were constitutive of Turkey’s history, its cleavage structure, and its party system ([Çınar 2019](#)).

One of the elements of the traditional cleavage structure is the state-mandated secularism and laicism, including a strict separation of state, society, and religion. By referring to Islam, the AKP activates a latent social cleavage of a Muslim-majority country that had long been politically suppressed ([Alaranta 2014](#); [Bilgin 2018](#)). Furthermore, the AKP has partially broken with the idea of Turkish nationalism, whose reference point is Turkey in its borders of 1923. By referring to the “glorious” past of the Ottoman Empire, the AKP has extended the boundaries of belonging. Hence, the AKP interprets the boundaries of collective identity differently than one would have expected from a right-wing populist party. In its definition of Turkish identity, it refers not to the Turkish nation-state but to the Ottoman Empire and not to the principle of secularism but to the community of Muslims, thus expanding the group of people who are considered to belong to Turkey. The example of the AKP illustrates that one should be careful in applying a general theory to specific cases.

8. Appendix

Table 4.2 Overview of sampled debates in the Turkish Grand National Assembly, political statements and election programs

Date	Public forum	Topic	Speaker	Party affiliation	
March 20, 2013	Grand National Assembly	Legislative proceedings on the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP)	Hasan Hüseyin Türkoğlu	MHP	
April 04, 2013	Grand National Assembly	Legislative proceedings on the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP)	Ali Serindağ	CHP	
June/ November 2015	General Elections		Election Program: “2015 Genel Seçimleri. Seçim Beyannamesi”	AKP	
			Election Program: “Seçim Bildirgesi 2015”	—	CHP
			Election Program: “Büyük İnsanlık. 2015 Seçim Bildirgesi”	—	HDP
			Election Program: “Toplumsal Onarım ve Huzurlu Gelecek	—	MHP
October 1, 2015	Grand National Assembly	Opening day of new legislative period	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (President)	AKP	
March 22, 2016	Grand National Assembly	MHP motion to investigate problems caused by Syrian asylum seekers	Zühal Topçu	MHP	
			Filiz Kerestecioğlu	HDP	
			Veli Ağbaba	CHP	
			Atay Uslu	AKP	
July 2, 2016	Iftar meeting in Kilis	Citizenship to Syrians	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (President)	AKP	
July 12, 2016	Grand National Assembly	MHP motion to investigate potential problems of the naturalization of Syrians	Özkan Yalım	CHP	
			Efkan Ala (Minister of Interior Affairs)	AKP	
			Ruhi Ersoy	MHP	

Date	Public forum	Topic	Speaker	Party affiliation
			Aytun Çıray	CHP
			Hüda Kaya	HDP
June 2018	General Elections		Election Program: “Guçlu Meclis Guçlu Hukümet Guçlu Türkiye. Yaparsa Yine AK Parti Yapar”	AKP
			Election Program: “Millet İçin Geliyoruz!”	CHP
			Election Program: “HDP 2018 Seçim Bildirgesi”	HDP
			Election Program: “Milletimizle Sözleşme”	IYIP
			Election Program: “Milli Diriliş Kutlu Yükseliş”	MHP
June 11, 2019	Grand National Assembly	IYIP motion to investigate problems caused by Syrian refugees	Ibrahim Halil Oral	IYIP
			Mahmut Toğrul	HDP
			Gamze Taşçier	CHP
			Mehmet Erdoğan	AKP
October 1, 2019	Grand National Assembly	Opening day of new legislative year	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (President)	AKP

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5

A humanitarian role model

Germany's initial open-door policy and restrictive turn toward Syrian refugees

1. Introduction

Refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war not only fled to neighboring countries like Turkey (examined in [Chapter 4](#)) but also tried to make their way across the Mediterranean to the EU. The number of refugees and asylum seekers from Syria and other countries arriving in the EU peaked in 2015 with almost 1.2 million first-time applicants ([Eurostat 2023](#)). This situation strained the EU's asylum system and its so-called "Dublin Regulation," according to which asylum requests must be processed in the first arrival countries, typically at the southern and southeastern borders of the EU. The "frontline states" like Greece and Italy, in particular, could no longer cope with the increased number of refugees. In light of the deteriorating situation, the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees ("Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge," BAMF) temporarily suspended the application of the Dublin Regulation for Syrians in the late summer of 2015, and the German government under Chancellor Angela Merkel decided to leave Germany's borders open to refugees traveling via Hungary. Despite adopting more restrictive measures later, Germany admitted by far the largest share of refugees among the EU member states, namely around 441,000 first-time applicants in 2015 and 722,000 in 2016 ([Eurostat 2023](#)). By the end of 2022, Germany has granted protection to almost one million refugees and asylum seekers from the main countries of origin, Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan ([Statistisches Bundesamt 2023](#)). Germany's open policy contrasts with other EU members like Poland, which—as we see in [Chapter 6](#)—has received almost no refugees.

The German government's openness to receiving refugees from the Middle East was widely hailed as a significant humanitarian gesture. For example, *Time* magazine named Angela Merkel Person of the Year 2015 ([Time 2015](#)). The German government's refugee policy is surprising given that, unlike Turkey, Germany is not a neighbor to the refugees' countries of origin, nor does it have historical ties with them. It was also performed by a conservative-led coalition government (in government until 2021), formed by the conservative "sister parties" CDU (in German, "Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands," Christian Democratic Union) and the CSU (in German, "Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern," Christian Social Union of Bavaria)

on the one hand,¹ and the SPD (in German, “Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands,” Social Democratic Party of Germany) on the other. The open admission stance is notable since conservative parties had worked to limit refugee admissions in Germany in previous decades.²

This chapter argues that the immediate German response to the refugee crisis in the late summer of 2015 was shaped by the government’s understanding of Germany as a “humanitarian role model.”³ At the heart of the government’s discourse lay a cosmopolitan self-understanding based on the commitment to universalist values that blurred the boundaries between Germans and refugees. First, Germany was defined in moral terms as a humanitarian country with a strong civil society that shows great solidarity with people in dire need fleeing a civil war. This frame was complemented by a legal frame. Instead of emphasizing national sovereignty, Germany’s commitment to universalist norms was highlighted, such as the constitutional right to asylum, international refugee law, and the refugees’ right to apply for asylum. The third frame emphasized Germany’s international position as a member of the EU committed to common European values. Nevertheless, admitting refugees was not only seen as a duty but also as beneficial. Germany was also defined as having a strong economy but with an aging population, and refugees were seen as potential contributors to human capital. In contrast to earlier debates about migration in Germany, the cultural identity of Germany and the cultural background of refugees played a minor role, thus blurring cultural boundaries. Also minor was framing refugees as a security threat.

An interesting characteristic of the German crisis response is that the left-wing opposition parties in the German parliament lauded the Merkel government’s initial crisis response and mostly shared its framing of the issue. Arguably, this broad consensus on refugee policy opened a “window of opportunity” for the emergence of a right-wing populist challenger party in the wake of the right-wing “PEGIDA”⁴ street protests. This party was the AfD (in German, “Alternative für Deutschland,” Alternative for Germany), which entered the German Bundestag after the 2017 federal elections and demanded a full closure of Germany’s borders to asylum seekers. The AfD’s framing of who “we” and the refugees are differs substantially from the other

¹ The CDU and the CSU run together in the election for the federal parliament. While the CSU is only on the ballot in Bavaria, the CDU is on the ballot in all other German states.

² While Germany has incorporated a right to asylum (and not merely a right to *seek* asylum, as required by international law) in its postwar Constitution, since the 1990s, German policymaking under the lead of the conservative CDU–CSU coalition expended significant efforts to limit this right (Laubenthal 2019; Mushaben 2017). Of particular importance in this endeavor was the EU’s Dublin Regulation because it essentially created a buffer zone of “safe third countries” around Germany and externalized border control to the EU’s external borders (Joppke 1997). This regulation made it more difficult for asylum seekers to claim their right to asylum in Germany and resulted in a significantly reduced number of asylum applications in the decades prior to 2015.

³ Already in late summer of 2015, the CSU and its party chairman and minister-president of Bavaria, Horst Seehofer, heavily criticized Merkel and demanded a more restrictive refugee policy. However, the CSU’s opposition was mostly formulated outside of the federal parliament and voiced by the Bavarian state government and did not significantly shape the German government’s initial response.

⁴ “PEGIDA” is the acronym for “Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident” in German.

parties by rejecting universalist value commitments and drawing strict boundaries between “us” and “them.” In legal terms, the AfD highlights national sovereignty and the German people’s right to decide who can cross the border and who cannot. Correspondingly, it subsumes refugees under the category of “migrants,” suggesting they do not have a right to enter Germany. Furthermore, the AfD mobilizes a cultural frame, defining Germany as a culturally homogenous community of descent to which the refugees defined as “Muslims” do not fit. This cultural framing contrasts with the cosmopolitan self-understanding of the other parties. Finally, the AfD frames refugees in economic terms as a burden to the German welfare state and in security terms as criminals and potential terrorists.

The rise of the AfD and the failure to find a common “European solution” to refugee displacement via the redistribution of refugees within the EU (due to the opposition of, among others, Poland, as described in [Chapter 6](#)) made the German government shift toward a more restrictive position over the winter of 2015–16. Temporary border controls were introduced, asylum law was restricted, and, following Germany’s lead, the EU signed a readmission agreement with Turkey to prevent further refugees from coming to the EU.⁵ Particularly the CSU demanded stricter border control and a significant reduction of the number of refugees allowed into Germany and even threatened to break the coalition over this issue ([Hertner 2022](#)). We show how the government’s policy shifts were not based on completely new frames but on subtle shifts within the original framing. Over the course of the debate, the distinction between “refugees” (who have a right to seek asylum) and “migrants” (who have no right to asylum) was increasingly highlighted to justify a more restrictive policy of border control and repatriation, in order not to overburden Germany’s humanitarian disposition. Additionally, Germany’s role in the EU was reinterpreted. Seeing that the proposal to redistribute refugees among EU member states had failed and many countries were reintroducing border controls, the German government emphasized Germany’s special obligation to maintain European unity by closing the EU’s external borders.

As in the other chapters, we can build on previous discourse analyses of the political debates in Germany. In particular, the analyses by Bastian Vollmer & Serhat Karakayali (2018) and Billy [Holzberg et al. \(2018\)](#) stand out, both conducting a critical discourse analysis of the German press. Both studies focus on the shift from an open to a more restrictive refugee policy. They offer a similar explanation, namely that it was primarily based on an increasing emphasis on the distinction between “deserving” refugees as opposed to “undeserving” economic migrants. [Holzberg et al. \(2018\)](#) describe this discursive process as “humanitarian securitization”: for some refugees to be protected and Germany’s reception capacities not to be overburdened,

⁵ The grand coalition government also introduced further restrictions to Germany’s asylum law after 2016, which we do not review in detail here, given that our chapter focuses mostly on the period from 2015 to 2016. They aimed to reduce the incentives to apply for asylum in Germany, expedite the return of nonrecognized asylum seekers, and better integrate refugees. At the time of writing, in 2023, the new German government formed by the SPD, the Greens, and the FDP supported the reform of the Common European Asylum System, which would introduce a mechanism of distributing refugees among EU member states and detention centers at the EU’s external borders.

others have to be rejected. In our analyses of the parliamentary debates, we find a similar shift and increasing emphasis on the distinction between “refugees” with a right to stay and “migrants” who can be sent back. However, what remains lacking in our view is how to make sense of the German government’s—as well as the main opposition parties’—openness toward refugees in the first place. This question is also pursued in Isabelle Lemay’s (2021) study of elite and media discourses. According to the author, such exceptional “moments of openness” toward refugees can be explained by perceptions of deservingness, relatedness, and perceived proximity of refugees, as well as constructions of national identity. While we concur with this argument, our analysis offers a more in-depth reconstruction of the cultural repertoires drawn on by the government and the opposition parties to construct their frames.

2. Background of the debate

2.1 Country information

Germany is the largest member state of the EU, one of the six founding members of the European Communities, and the EU’s largest economy. Emerging from the defeat of the German Reich in World War II, the Federal Republic of Germany, founded in 1949, managed to establish itself—against the odds of its authoritarian and totalitarian history—as a stable liberal democracy at the heart of Europe. It reunited with the German Democratic Republic after the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, forming the contemporary Federal Republic. After an initial reluctance to acknowledge Nazi crimes, the memory of its totalitarian past under the Nazi regime between 1933 and 1945 permeates its political, cultural, and social life until today. “Never again” has become a crucial point of reference for public discourse—only recently challenged by the rise of the radical right-wing AfD.

We argue that the political debate on the 2015–16 refugee crisis must be understood against the background of three larger issues. First, the remarkable shift in the German conception of nationhood that has occurred over the last decades and its acknowledgment of having become a “country of immigration,” second, the controversial debates over Germany’s exceptional right to asylum enshrined in the German Constitution, and third, Germany’s position in the EU and commitment to European integration.

Conceptions of nationhood and the associated philosophies of immigration not only shape immigration policies in general but can also impact a country’s refugee policy in particular. For a long time, Germany was seen as the prime example of an ethnocultural model of nationhood (Brubaker 1992). In contrast to other large Western European states like France, Spain, or the UK, Germany had developed into a nation-state relatively late, with the foundation of the German Reich under Prussian leadership in 1871. The German concept of “nation” was thus less a product of state centralization, as in France, but rather an intellectual construct, “a nation in search of a state.” Instead of the conception of a community defined by shared laws and political values, the German conception of nationhood was rather based on

the notion of cultural, linguistic, or racial commonality. This definition implied an exclusive instead of an assimilationist understanding of who belongs to the nation and who does not, as national belonging was defined by descent.

This ethnocultural conception of nationhood shaped Germany's citizenship and immigration policy until the end of the twentieth century (Brubaker 1992). Citizenship was based on the principle of *ius sanguinis* dating back to the citizenship law of 1913; that is, it could only be acquired by descent. Naturalization was restrictive and granted at the discretion of the state; dual nationality was excluded. Accordingly, postwar West Germany officially did not understand itself as a “country of immigration” (see overviews in Geddes & Scholten 2016; Martin 2014). Many so-called “guest workers” were recruited from abroad to support the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s, but they were expected to go back to their countries of origin after performing their jobs. Major reforms were only introduced in the late 1990s by the coalition government of the SPD and the Greens (Alliance 90/the Greens, in German, “Bündnis 90/Die Grünen”) as the citizenship law was reformed to include the principle of *ius soli*—where citizenship is determined by place of birth—dual nationality was permitted (in some cases), and immigration law was enacted, focused on attracting highly skilled migrants.

However, despite its restrictive citizenship and immigration law, Germany had de facto turned into a country of immigration over the second half of the twentieth century already, primarily because the guest workers and their families did not return to their home countries as expected but settled permanently. Just prior to the refugee crisis, in 2013, around 15 million people living in Germany had a “migration background” (either they or one of their parents were born outside of Germany), many of them Turkish (around 2.8 million) (Geddes & Scholten 2016). Consequently, in recent decades, there have been heated debates about immigration and multiculturalism, in particular regarding the integration of Muslim immigrants and their descendants (for many others, see Foroutan 2019; El-Mafaalani 2018). For example, while the conservative CDU supported a German “Leitkultur” (Merz 2000) and Merkel pronounced that multiculturalism had “absolutely failed” (Der Spiegel 2010), the German president, Christian Wulff, also from the CDU, acknowledged that “Islam belongs to Germany” (Wulff 2010). Considering this background, the fact that the cultural background of the refugees was so little remarked upon during the political debates on the refugee crisis of 2015–16 testifies to an important change in the German collective self-understanding. It was only the emerging radical right AfD that explicitly politicized this issue.

A further aspect relevant to the debate on admitting refugees is the centrality of the German Constitution, which has always stood in an uneasy relationship with Germany's ethnocultural conception of nationhood. Enacted in 1949 in a clear break with the country's totalitarian past, the Constitution (or “Basic Law”) developed into one of the main reference points for the construction of civic collective identity—a “constitutional patriotism,” as German intellectuals like Jürgen Habermas have called it (Müller & Scheppele 2008). The Constitution contains strong safeguards for the protection of human and civil rights. One of those rights is the right to asylum

extended to those persecuted politically, as enshrined in Article 16(a) (Bosswick 2000; Joppke 1997). In contrast to international law, this is not merely a right to *seek* asylum, which simply obliges the state to consider an asylum claim, but a right *to* asylum, which is enforceable against the state. This constitutional commitment to the right of asylum was certainly born out of a sense of moral reparation for the crimes of the Nazi regime and its persecution of Jews, the political opposition, and other minorities.

In the early decades of the Federal Republic, only few asylum seekers entered Germany, and these were mainly dissidents from Eastern Europe. However, an increasing number of asylum seekers in the 1980s and early 1990s, in particular refugees fleeing the Balkan Wars, led to a controversial reform of Germany's constitutional right to asylum, known as the "asylum compromise" between the governing CDU-CSU and the main opposition party SPD (Bosswick 2000; Joppke 1997). It did not go as far as removing the right to asylum from the Constitution but stipulated that those entering via a "safe third country" would not be entitled to asylum, and that those coming from a country of origin considered "safe" would carry an additional burden of proof on their asylum claim. A crucial aspect of the asylum compromise was the Dublin Convention signed in 1990 (recast as EU law in 2003 in the form of the Dublin II Regulation and amended in 2013 as Dublin III) by the member states of the European Communities. It stipulates that those member states where asylum seekers are first registered are required to process asylum claims, while other countries may send asylum seekers back to their first country of entry in the EU. In effect, this created a "buffer zone" around Germany, as it was no longer obliged to consider the asylum claims from those refugees traveling via land. The Merkel government's decision to suspend the application of the Dublin Regulation for Syrian refugees temporarily lifted this buffer.

A final aspect that is key to understanding the German debate about the refugee crisis is Germany's role in the EU and the German elites' commitment to European integration (Díez Medrano 2003; Risse 2010). Germany is the EU's most populous member state and largest economy. Along with France, Germany is considered the "motor of European integration," as the most important steps toward further integration are based on the joint initiative of both countries—even though, more recently, the balance of power between the two has been shifting toward Germany due to its economic strength. Germany's commitment to European integration is even stated in the preamble to the German Constitution, which asserts that the newly founded Federal Republic is "inspired by the determination to promote world peace as an equal partner in a united Europe."

The German commitment to European integration is based on a specific interpretation of Europe's recent history. European integration came to be understood as a moral obligation to prevent another war and as a way to overcome Germany's nationalist past. As Díez Medrano (2003) found in his study of attitudes toward the EU, German elites support the EU because they understand it primarily as a peace project and a way to curb nationalism in Europe. While national pride was delegitimized by the nationalist excess of Nazism, the postwar German national identity construction acquired a strong European component. As Risse (2010) puts

it, to be a “good German” now means to be a “good European.” Among Germany’s elite, there is also rather strong support for a federalist vision of the EU, which sees political unification as an endpoint of European integration. This European orientation might help explain the frequent appeals to and concerns about European unity in the German debate on the refugee crisis.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that this commitment to European integration is not only morally motivated. As an export-oriented economy, Germany is one of the main profiteers of the EU’s internal market and the corresponding freedom of movement for goods, capital, services, and people. In 2021, 53.1 percent of German exports went to the EU27, and 51.9 percent of its imports came from the EU ([Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action 2022](#): 1). Indeed, particularly during the Euro crisis—which immediately preceded the refugee crisis—the German government was often accused of pursuing a selfish policy by imposing harsh austerity measures on over-indebted Southern European countries (Greece in particular) in exchange for bailouts. Some commentators argued that Germany was mindlessly imposing its own ordoliberal understanding of economic policy on the EU, thereby refashioning it into a “German Europe” ([Beck 2013](#)). Arguably, this created some resentment in the EU, and the fact that during the refugee crisis, Germany began to appeal to “European solidarity” in the distribution of refugees left the impression of a double standard in Germany’s EU policy. The failure to find a common European solution to the refugee crisis is often attributed to this tension.

Before moving on to the description of the critical discourse moments that triggered the debates on admitting refugees, we quickly analyze Germany’s refugee and asylum law. As mentioned above, its cornerstone is the constitutional right to asylum, as enshrined in Article 16(a). However, an entitlement to asylum is restricted to those who are politically persecuted, do not enter via a safe third country, and do not come from a safe country of origin. Germany also grants refugee protection in accordance with the criteria laid out in the 1951 Refugee Convention, to persons who face persecution for reasons of race, nationality, political opinion, religion, or membership of a particular social group. Furthermore, in the transposition of the EU’s “Qualification Directive” 2011/95/EU, Germany also grants subsidiary protection to those who might face serious harm if returned to their countries of origin, such as the death penalty, torture, or indiscriminate violence. Finally, for those who are not recognized as refugees or do not receive subsidiary protection, there might also be a ban on deportation, which applies because of a concrete danger to life, limb, or liberty in the country of origin ([Federal Office for Migration and Refugees 2023](#)). These different categories entail different residence rights in Germany.

2.2 Critical discourse moments: The opening of borders and a restrictive turn

Our analysis concentrates on political debates about the admission of refugees during the so-called “European refugee crisis,” which reached its peak in 2015 and 2016. The

number of asylum seekers coming to the EU had begun to rise in 2014 with more than half a million asylum applications and peaked with around 1.2 million asylum applications in both 2015 and 2016 (Eurostat 2023). The origins of this refugee movement go back to the conflicts and wars that swept across North Africa and the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2011 and the US-led military interventions in the Middle East. Thus, the main countries of origin of refugees were Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq; but many were also coming from the Western Balkans (though with low prospects of receiving asylum). In Syria, a civil war between the troops of dictator Bashar al-Assad and opposition forces, followed by the spread of the Islamist terrorist organization ISIS, led to around 6.7 million refugees fleeing from Syria. Most were received in the neighboring countries Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. But as conditions in the refugee camps deteriorated (partly due to declining financial support by the international community), many embarked on the route to the EU. The refugees reached the EU mainly via two routes: from the Middle East via Turkey to Greece or from North Africa over the Mediterranean to Italy.

According to the EU's Dublin Regulation, the refugees' first arrival countries in the EU are required to register the refugees and process their asylum applications. The Dublin Regulation is part of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), which harmonizes standards of reception and treatment of asylum seekers in the EU member states to complement the EU's internal free movement regime and the abolishment of internal border controls. However, the low incentive to comply with the Dublin Regulation, as well as the increasing number of refugees reaching the EU, led the first arrival countries, mainly Italy and Greece, to desist from registering the refugees and "waved them through" to other destinations in North and North-west Europe. Many refugees traveled on via the so-called "Western Balkan route," re-entering the EU in Hungary (and later Croatia, after Hungary constructed a fence on its border with Serbia) (Frontex 2016), from where they sought to reach Austria, Germany, and Sweden. As described in Section 2.1, Germany had been a strong supporter of the Dublin Regulation—as it effectively shielded the country from incoming refugees—and opposed a redistribution of refugees within the EU in the run-up to the crisis of 2015–16.

We focus on three critical discourse moments to capture the development of the German discourse over time. The first period covers the late summer of 2015 after several fatal events increased the pressure on the so far reluctant German government to do something about the intensifying refugee crisis (see overviews in Blume et al. 2016 and *Der Spiegel* 2015). Since 2014, the number of incidents of migrant boats capsizing in the Mediterranean on their way from North Africa to Europe had been increasing dramatically. In late August 2015, seventy-one refugees from the Middle East were found in Austria, dead by suffocation in an abandoned truck that had been operated by smugglers. In early September, the picture of a dead 2-year-old Kurdish boy, Alan Kurdi, made headlines, who had drowned in his family's attempt to cross the Aegean Sea from Turkey to the EU. At the same time, pressure was building up in Hungary, which had increasingly adopted restrictive measures due to the rapidly rising number of refugees registered. As thousands of refugees attempted to travel

on to Germany, some of them by foot, in what was labeled the “march of hope,” the German government (in conjunction with Austria) desisted from closing the border, effectively turning Germany into one of the main destination countries for refugees.

The second period covers the fall and winter of 2015–16 and was marked by several attempts to curb the number of refugees coming to Germany. Temporary controls at the German border had been introduced in mid-September 2015. Pressure on Angela Merkel’s government increased both domestically as well as internationally. Domestically, xenophobic arson attacks on refugee shelters increased dramatically, and the radical right-wing party AfD rapidly gained ground in state elections, capitalizing on an anti-refugee platform. Even within the government, the CSU—the more conservative “sister party” of the CDU—threatened to break with the coalition over its refugee policy, demanding an “upper limit” of 200,000 refugees to be accepted in Germany. Internationally, the German government unsuccessfully called for a solidarity redistribution of refugees among EU member states, meeting with opposition, particularly from Central and Eastern European EU member states (see [Chapter 6](#) on Poland). In addition, several terrorist attacks and criminal incidents swayed public opinion, such as the mass sexual assaults on women at Cologne’s main station on New Year’s Eve 2015, with asylum seekers among the perpetrators.

During this period, the government coalition introduced two restrictive reforms to Germany’s asylum law (the “Asylpaket I and II”), which accelerated asylum procedures, eased deportations, extended the number of safe countries of origin (to Western Balkan countries), and suspended family reunification for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, among other measures. The most significant measure to reduce the number of incoming refugees was an agreement reached between the EU and Turkey in March 2016 under Germany’s lead. It stipulated that Turkey was to prevent refugees from traveling onward to the EU in return for financial assistance. Irregular migrants crossing the EU border would be sent back to Turkey in exchange for Syrian refugees. In conjunction with border closures enacted by the countries along the Western Balkan route, this agreement drastically reduced the number of refugees coming to the EU.

The third and final period covers the federal elections of September 2017 and the entry of the AfD into the German Bundestag. This election was a momentous shift since it marked the first time since the 1960s that a party to the right of the CDU–CSU managed to enter the Bundestag. Originally formed as a party of fiscal conservatives that opposed the government’s policies to combat the Euro crisis, the AfD established itself as a radical right-wing populist party with an anti-immigrant platform after 2013. It capitalized mainly on the refugee crisis, fundamentally opposing the government and the other established parties by calling for a complete halt to immigration and the closure of Germany’s borders. The AfD unites an anti-immigration position with Euroskepticism, a critique of gender and diversity discourse, and an anti-establishment attitude. However, despite the AfD’s entry into the Bundestag, the refugee issue no longer attained the same salience as in 2015 and 2016.

Overall, and despite the restrictive turn of government policy and the rise of the AfD, Germany ultimately accepted the largest number of refugees among the EU

member states over the years 2015 and 2016. Between 2015 and the end of 2016, around 1.2 million first-time asylum applications were lodged in Germany, most of them by Syrians (around 425,000), followed by Afghans (around 158,000) and Iraqis (around 126,000) ([Federal Office for Migration and Refugees 2017](#)). Recognition rates were high, particularly for Syrian refugees. Of the decisions reached on asylum applications by Syrians during this period, practically none were rejected, and most received either refugee status according to the 1951 Refugee Convention (95.8 percent in 2015 and 56.4 percent in 2016) or subsidiary protection (41.2 percent in 2016). Recognition rates were somewhat lower for Iraqis (88.6 percent in 2015 and 70.2 percent in 2016) and Afghans (47.4 percent in 2015 and 55.8 percent in 2016). In contrast, the rates were particularly low for applicants from Balkan countries. The number of first-time asylum applications subsided after 2016, to around 198,000 in 2017 and around 103,000 in 2020 ([Federal Office for Migration and Refugees 2021](#)), and the topic gradually began to drift out of public attention until Germany again became one of the main reception countries of Ukrainian refugees fleeing the Russian invasion in 2022. In contrast to the reception of Syrian and Middle Eastern refugees, however, Ukrainian refugees received temporary protection under the EU's temporary protection directive, and the issue was not politicized in public discourse.

2.3 Description of the forum, political actors, and debates

As in the other chapters of this book, our analysis concentrates primarily on debates in the German Bundestag but complements them with public statements in other forums and party manifestos. The German Bundestag is one of the two legislative bodies (next to the Bundesrat, which represents the *Länder*) whose members are directly elected by the German people in a combination of proportional party lists and a first-past-the-post system. Parties need to receive more than 5 percent of the vote to be represented in the Bundestag. The Bundestag elects a chancellor from its midst.

To capture the development of the debate on admitting refugees, we analyzed debates and statements from the three critical discourse moments mentioned earlier. Most of the debates on the refugee crisis we analyzed fell into the period of the first “grand coalition” government between 2013 and 2017, formed by the conservative CDU–CSU and the social democratic SPD led by Chancellor Angela Merkel. In the 2013 federal elections, the CDU–CSU received 41.5 percent of the vote, followed by the SPD with 25.7 percent, the Left (in German, “*Die Linke*”) with 8.6 percent, and the Greens with 8.4 percent. This translated into the following seats in the Bundestag: Of 631 total seats, the CDU–CSU received 311 seats, followed by the SPD with 193, the Left with 64, and the Greens with 63 ([Federal Returning Officer 2013](#)).

Our analysis covers the following statements and debates from the initial crisis response. First, we included Angela Merkel's press conference from August 31, 2015, which made headlines due to her assertion that “we can do it.” This so-called “summer

press conference” has special importance in the German public sphere. It is organized by a union of journalists, takes place once a year, and is an occasion during which the chancellor explains the government’s program to the broader public and receives questions from the attending journalists. This press conference was immediately preceded by the decision of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees to suspend the application of the Dublin Regulation for Syrian refugees and the discovery of a truck operated by migrant smugglers found in Austria with seventy-one suffocated refugees from Syria and Iraq.

Second, we focused on the so-called “budget debate” in the Bundestag on September 9, 2015. During the budget debate, the government’s yearly budget plan is presented, which involves a controversial debate on the government’s general policy. The chancellor and the parties’ parliamentary leaders take part in the debate. In 2015, the budget debate was heavily influenced by the refugee crisis. We included seven speeches from this debate from one to two representatives of each party.

As mentioned, the government refugee policy shifted toward a more restrictive position over the fall and winter of 2015–16. To capture this shift, next, we focused on a government declaration in the German Bundestag on March 16, 2016, which took place on the eve of a European Council meeting during which the readmissions agreement between the EU and Turkey would be decided upon. The government declaration was followed by a debate that, again, included representatives of all parties in the Bundestag. In total, we included six speeches from this session.

Additionally, as this period also saw the rise of the radical-right wing AfD, we included two extra-parliamentary speeches by AfD members from 2016, prior to the party’s entry into the Bundestag. The first one was held by the then AfD party chairman, Jörg Meuthen, during a federal party convent on April 30, 2016, and the second by Alexander Gauland, the AfD’s future party leader, at a party rally in Brandenburg on June 2, 2016, a speech widely noted for its radicalism.

We also analyzed the party manifestos of the main contending parties for the 2017 federal elections, which were still shaped by the refugee issue (seven in total)⁶ and a debate after the entry of the AfD into the German Bundestag. In the 2017 elections, the vote share of the CDU–CSU dropped to 33 percent, as did the share of the SPD with 20.5 percent. They were followed by the AfD with 12.6 percent, the FDP (in German, “Freie Demokratische Partei,” Free Democratic Party) with 10.7 percent, the Left with 9.2 percent, and the Greens with 8.9 percent. Of 709 total seats, the seats won by the CDU–CSU fell to 246 and those of the SPD to 153. Even though it was the first time the AfD entered the German Bundestag, it became the largest opposition party with ninety-four seats. The liberal FDP, which did not surpass the 5 percent hurdle in the previous elections, re-entered the Bundestag with eighty seats, followed by the Left with sixty-nine seats and the Green Party with sixty-seven ([Federal Returning Officer 2017](#)). After talks to form a coalition between the CDU–CSU,

⁶ Next to the joint electoral program of the CDU and CSU, the CSU issued its own program, the “Plan for Bavaria” (*Bayernplan*), partly to highlight its different refugee and migration policy in contrast to the CDU.

the Greens, and the Liberals failed, the grand coalition between the CDU–CSU and the SPD under Chancellor Merkel was renewed. The grand coalition stayed in government until the federal elections of 2021, won by the SPD, which entered a coalition with the Greens and the FDP.

Finally, we focused our analysis on a debate that took place on March 21, 2018, when Merkel's newly formed coalition government presented its plan. We included her speech and that of the AfD chair, which, as the main opposition party, focused on the government's refugee policy. However, by that time, the refugee issue was no longer at the top of the political agenda and was not taken up extensively by the other MPs in their respective speeches.

It should be noted that we also included in our analysis a statement by the leader of the liberal FDP, Christian Lindner, at the party convention on May 12, 2018, which took up the issue of migration and refugee policy. However, given the limited impact of the FDP on the refugee discourse, we do not consider it in this chapter.

3. The positioning and framing of the CDU–CSU and SPD government coalition in the late summer of 2015

The government coalition changed its policy position and framing over time. Therefore, we present two separate analyses for the CDU–CSU and SPD coalition: this section, covering the first part of the period of analysis, during late summer of 2015, and the next section, covering the rest of the period of analysis.

3.1 Positioning: Opening borders and welcoming refugees

At the height of the refugee crisis in the late summer of 2015, the coalition government adopted a notably welcoming policy toward refugees. In her summer press conference, Merkel evoked the basic right of politically persecuted persons to receive asylum and famously remarked that “we can do it” (Angela Merkel, CDU, August 31, 2015), thus signaling that Germany was prepared to receive refugees. At the beginning of September, the government refrained from closing the border to those refugees traveling via Hungary and Austria and consistently argued for the non-bureaucratic admission and rapid integration of refugees in Germany, as Merkel expressed in several statements, such as:

Those who come to us as asylum seekers or are recognized as war refugees need our help so that they can integrate quickly. They need help to learn German quickly. They need to find a job quickly. Many of them will become new citizens of our country. We should learn from the experience of the 1960s, when we called in guest workers, and give integration the highest priority from the very beginning. If we do it well, that holds more opportunities than risks. (Angela Merkel, CDU, September 9, 2015)

Even though it had already been suggested at this point in time that those without a right to stay under Germany's refugee law would have to be sent back:

Those who do not flee political persecution or war but come to us out of economic hardship will not be able to stay in Germany. As difficult as their personal lives may be, this is nevertheless part of the truth, and we have to say it. We will have to carry out the acceptance and registration procedures, as well as the repatriations, much faster and more consistently than before. (Angela Merkel, CDU, September 9, 2015)

At the same time, the coalition government urged the EU to come together to find a common solution to the refugee crisis. Indeed, Germany became the main proponent of a mechanism to relocate refugees within the EU, according to specific quotas (see also [Zaun 2018](#)):

Of course, we need solidarity within Europe. At the moment, Jean-Claude Juncker is giving his State of the Union address. He will make proposals for the first step of fair distribution. Overall, however, we need a binding agreement on a binding distribution of refugees between all member states according to fair criteria, that is, a different distribution than we have now. (Angela Merkel, CDU, September 9, 2015)

As already mentioned in the introduction, however, the grand coalition did not always act in unison on the refugee crisis. Next to some differences between the CDU–CSU and the SPD, Merkel's refugee policy particularly caused a rift between the two sister parties, CDU and CSU. From the very beginning of the crisis, the CSU and its party chairman, Horst Seehofer, were critical of Merkel's decision to open Germany's borders, demanding a more restrictive policy. Initially, the government resisted these calls, which were formulated mostly by the Bavarian state government and outside of the federal parliament, but in the second period of analysis, the coalition moved toward a more restrictive position—without, however, giving in to the CSU's demand for an “upper limit” to the number of refugees admitted. We concentrate on the more welcoming approach to refugees in this subchapter, given that it was dominant in the late summer of 2015. As we see next, this welcoming approach was based on a cosmopolitan definition of the German collective identity and a humanitarian framing of refugees.

3.2 Who are “we”? A humanitarian society committed to refugee rights and a strong economy

At the heart of the discourse of the government coalition is a definition of the German “we” in *morally* cosmopolitan terms. German society is not defined as a closed community committed exclusively to the well-being of its own members. Rather, it is committed to the values of humanitarianism and international solidarity and thus

ready to extend a helping hand to foreigners as well. The carrier of this humanitarianism is German civil society, which is seen to have self-organized in an exemplary manner to welcome and help the refugees coming to Germany. A visible expression of this new “welcome culture,” as it came to be called, was the pictures of volunteers who greeted the refugees traveling via Hungary at the Munich main station in the late summer of 2015. Images of people applauding, offering help, and police officers taking care of refugee children became iconic:

While chaos and helplessness dominated in Budapest, there were images from Munich of helpfulness, solidarity, and mutual respect. I would like to express my sincere thanks to all the public service employees and volunteers who accomplished this. Thanks to these helpers, Germany is showing the whole world its best side during these days. (Thomas Oppermann, SPD, September 9, 2015)

The government coalition expresses considerable pride in this showing of solidarity. It can be hypothesized that this is also because it projects another image of Germany than the common stereotype. This stereotype experienced a revival during the Euro crisis, casting Germany as a self-interested actor that mercilessly pushed through austerity measures at the expense of others. Germany’s solidarity with refugees is seen as correcting this image.

While Germany is defined in cosmopolitan terms and thus, in principle, open to foreigners seeking protection, strong symbolic boundaries are drawn against those who do not share this cosmopolitanism and have violently protested against the admission of refugees. The refugee crisis not only saw an outpouring of solidarity among Germany’s civil society, but at the same time, the emergence of radical right-wing movements like the anti-immigrant PEGIDA and AfD, and an unprecedented number of arson attacks on refugee accommodation centers were perpetrated. These acts are defined as not representing the true German society:

We will not allow our fundamental values and our humanity to be betrayed by xenophobes. It is repulsive and shameful when refugee homes are attacked, when people are molested, when people are assaulted, and when dull messages of hate are spread wherever. We will act against this with the full force of the rule of law. (Angela Merkel, CDU, September 9, 2015)

Second, the moral self-definition then turns into a *legal* self-definition. In the view of the governing coalition, the German state as a constitutional liberal democracy is not only an expression of national sovereignty but also bound by universalist principles. These principles include treating everyone—including foreigners—with equal dignity and, more specifically, granting asylum to those fleeing persecution. On the one hand, this duty stems from Germany’s commitment to international law and human rights and, on the other, from its Constitution. As we have seen, Germany is an exceptional case because the right to receive asylum from persecution is a basic right enshrined in the Constitution (Article 16a GG). This article is the consequence

of Germany recognizing its historical responsibility for mass persecution and displacement during World War II. Even though the scope of the right to asylum was severely restricted during the “asylum compromise” of 1993, Chancellor Merkel and other speakers frequently evoke the spirit of the law to justify an open admissions policy:

The fundamental right to asylum for politically persecuted persons applies. We can be proud of the humanity of our Basic Law. It is particularly evident in this article. We also grant protection to all those who flee from wars and come to us. They, too, are entitled to this protection. (Angela Merkel, CDU, August 31, 2015)

Third, the government coalition’s political discourse on refugees is also shaped by an *international* positioning of Germany as a country strongly committed to the EU and its values. Germany is imagined not as an isolated nation but as a nation embedded within a European community of values. Consequently, admitting refugees is understood as a national task and a common European task. In the view of the government coalition, helping refugees is a requirement of the fundamental values of the EU:

Then there is the European dimension, and here I believe we have to say Europe as a whole must act. The states must share the responsibility for refugees seeking asylum. Universal civic rights have been closely linked to Europe and its history. This is one of the founding impulses of the European Union. If Europe fails on the refugee issue, this close bond with universal civic rights will be broken. It will be destroyed, and it will not be the Europe that we imagine, and it will not be the Europe that we must continue to develop today as a founding myth. (Angela Merkel, CDU, August 31, 2015)

Germany, as one of the leading EU member states, has a particularly salient role in working toward a common European solution to the refugee crisis:

Time and again, we experience that there are challenges in Europe, where it hinges particularly on us, on Germany, on Germany’s power, and on Germany’s strength. Very often, we have overcome these challenges together with France. Now again, the French President and I, after preparatory work by the interior ministers, have made proposals to the Commission on how we can better master the refugee situation. (Angela Merkel, CDU, September 9, 2015)

These frames are complemented, fourth, by a more instrumental *economic* frame. Germany is defined as a strong economy that has the capacity to carry the “burden” of receiving refugees. This sentiment is precisely the message Chancellor Angela Merkel sent in her famous summer press conference of 2015 when she stated that “we can do it.” In the same speech, she goes on to characterize the German economy as follows: “Our economy is strong, our labor market is robust, even receptive. Let’s think about

the area of skilled workers. When so many people take on so much to fulfill their dream of living in Germany, that really doesn't give us the worst credentials" (Angela Merkel, CDU, August 31, 2015).

Moreover, the German economy is not only defined as being capable of absorbing refugees. It is also occasionally defined as needing refugee labor power to top up labor market shortages resulting from Germany's demographic decline. Before the refugee crisis, the shortage of qualified labor ("Fachkräftemangel") was a cause of concern and a frequent topic in political debates. The influx of refugees with the necessary skills is often cited as a partial remedy, as expressed in the following quote: "Most refugees from war zones will also stay with us permanently. We must not see this only as a burden. We must also see it as a great opportunity for an aging society to attract young, skilled workers" (Thomas Oppermann, SPD, September 9, 2015).

Finally, but less salient, Germany is defined in *cultural* terms as an open and tolerant country that makes no distinctions based on the cultural background of the refugees coming to Germany. Whether Germany is a "country of immigration" has caused heated political debates in the past (Hertner 2022). In facing the refugee crisis, the grand coalition now answers this question affirmatively:

If you remember, in view of the CDU's anniversary celebrations, I spoke about Germany being an immigration country. We are currently experiencing immigration in a very specific form, namely, in this case, through asylum seekers, through civil war refugees. By human judgment, many of them will stay with us for a very long time. (Angela Merkel, CDU, August 31, 2015)

Nevertheless, the government coalition does not adhere to a multiculturalist view of German society—understood in the sense of the coexistence of different cultures. Rather, it is emphasized that refugees have to adapt to Germany's laws and norms, integrate into German society, and that the formation of "parallel societies" should be avoided:

A country that welcomes many newcomers, that also welcomes many who come from completely different cultural backgrounds, must also make it clear what rules apply here. That, too, is part of an open society. We must not look away when milieus that reject integration solidify or when parallel societies develop. There must be no tolerance here; we must also say that from the beginning. (Angela Merkel, CDU, September 9, 2015)

Overall, the absence of *security*-related frames in the government's discourse is notable. Even under the pressure of large refugee flows, speakers of the grand coalition do not evoke a threat scenario in debating the refugee crisis.

3.3 Who are “they”? People in need with a right to asylum

In line with its definition of the “we,” the members of the grand coalition define refugees first and foremost in *moral* terms as people fleeing a grave humanitarian crisis and who therefore require help. The boundary between “us” and “them” is blurred by appealing to the refugees’ emergency situation. Speakers vividly emphasize violence and disaster as sources of displacement, the refugees’ plight during their journey to Europe (including drownings in the Mediterranean), and the poor conditions in the refugee camps in first-arrival countries. These images suggest that refugees require help and must be admitted to Germany. An example is the following quote from a speech by Chancellor Merkel, who emphasizes the individual fates behind the bare numbers:

One of these consequences [of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq] is that up to 800,000 people are expected to apply for the status of civil war refugees or political asylum. That would be the highest number ever registered in Germany. So much for the numbers. But behind them are life fates. We all follow the tragedies that take place, whether they are photos of dead children who have perished in a horrific way or whether they are the horrific suffering and death of the people in the truck. They are exemplary of many, many fates. (Angela Merkel, CDU, September 9, 2015)

Second, the government coalition mobilizes a *legal* frame to emphasize that refugees have fundamental rights and thus have a right to apply for asylum in Germany. Speakers refer to the right to asylum for persons fleeing political persecution enshrined in the German Constitution, as well as the right of refugees fleeing civil war to receive subsidiary protection as stipulated by EU law. However, a distinction is also made between those who have a “right to stay” according to refugee law and those who do not. The latter include those who are migrating for economic reasons, who come from third countries considered to be safe, or who have already applied for protection elsewhere, as previously mentioned: “Those who do not flee political persecution or war but come to us out of economic hardship will not be able to stay in Germany. As difficult as their personal lives may be, this is nevertheless part of the truth, and we have to say it” (Angela Merkel, CDU, September 9, 2015).

Note, however, that even though the distinction between “migrants” and “refugees” is made, speakers do try to show compassion for those who “merely” migrate for economic reasons or come from “safe countries of origin,” like the Balkans. They express an understanding of these migrants’ motives to migrate but argue that Germany has to concentrate on those who are most at risk because not all persons in need can be admitted:

First, the refugees who come to us, who have a reason for seeking asylum and will therefore remain in our country for a longer period of time, must not only be accommodated in a humane manner in the initial reception facility but also everything

must be done to ensure that they make their way into our society and onto the labor market very quickly. That is the big challenge. The second message. Thomas Oppermann also said it clearly: from a personal perspective, one can understand when one or the other says: I'm looking for a country where I have greater opportunities with my family than in my home country. I know what I'm talking about: More than 100 years ago, people from the Swabian Alb emigrated to America because the land no longer fed them. But it is also clear that we have to say: Those who have no reason for asylum and come anyway must return to their homeland as quickly as possible. This message must be clear, and we must not compromise on it. We will do everything in our power to take care of those who have a reason to stay and the others simply cannot stay in this country. (Volker Kauder, CDU, September 9, 2015)

Third, the grand coalition also frames refugees in *economic* terms as human capital that can fill shortages in Germany's labor market. A major point of reference is Germany's guest worker policy of the 1950s and 1960s. Instead of repeating the mistakes of the past and expecting refugees to return to their home country, speakers argue that Germany should be prepared to integrate refugees as effectively as possible, so they can also be of "profit":

We must not repeat the mistakes we made with the guest workers—as the Chancellor also pointed out. We did not integrate them quickly, believing that they would soon leave us. That was a serious mistake with far-reaching consequences. Most refugees from war zones will also stay with us for the long term. We must not see this only as a burden. We must also see it as a great opportunity for an aging society to attract young, skilled workers. If we do it better this time, then not only can the refugees benefit from Germany, but Germany can also benefit from the refugees. (Thomas Oppermann, SPD, September 9, 2015)

Fourth, the grand coalition rejects drawing *cultural* boundaries against refugees. Instead, it strongly criticizes radical right-wing movements and the emerging AfD for highlighting the cultural and religious background of refugees and suggesting that, as predominantly Muslims, they are incompatible with German culture. Instead, speakers blur cultural boundaries by referring to the equal dignity of all persons, regardless of their background:

I believe that our system of values in Europe is built on the dignity of every individual. It grieves me when people start saying, "We don't want Muslims; we are a Christian country." Maybe tomorrow, someone will say, "Christianity is also not so important anymore; we are without any religion." That cannot be right. I have just as little understanding for that as I do for statements that are made in our own country, and we have to talk about that in Europe, too. (Angela Merkel, CDU, August 31, 2015)

Speakers do sometimes express awareness that refugees have a different cultural background than Germans. But different culture is not seen as an influencing factor in deciding whether refugees should be admitted or not. Rather, this issue is to be taken into account in integration policies.

Finally, it is again notable that the grand coalition does not mobilize *security*-related frames, not even to justify more restrictive policies. On the contrary, even after security incidents, it emphasizes that one should not blame all refugees for terrorist attacks or crimes.

4. The positioning and framing of the CDU–CSU and SPD government coalition in the fall and winter of 2015–16

This section continues covering the government coalition, starting in the second part of the period of analysis, during the fall and winter of 2015–16, when it changes its policy position.

4.1 Positioning: Taking back control

Over the fall and winter of 2015–16, the grand coalition shifted toward a more restrictive approach and altered its rhetoric accordingly. As we have seen, already in mid-September 2015, temporary border controls were introduced at Germany's southeastern border. Then German asylum law was tightened, and, most importantly, the government pushed for the EU–Turkey readmission agreement in March 2016, which had the effect of closing the EU–Turkey border. Over this period, the rhetoric of the grand coalition government shifted from the need to help refugees to the need to reduce the number of refugees coming to Germany. This shift becomes evident in Merkel's wording: "Therefore, the all-important question remains: how can we succeed in reducing the number of refugees, not only for some but for all of us, in a sustainable and lasting way and without weakening essential achievements of our life in Europe? These are precisely the goals of the pan-European approach" (Angela Merkel, CDU, March 16, 2016).

Thus, the coalition government effectively moved closer to the more restrictive position demanded by the CSU. Despite this shift, however, the CSU adopted an even more restrictive position, demanding not only the reduction of the number of refugees coming to Germany through indirect means like the EU–Turkey deal but rather directly through the introduction of an "upper limit" on the numbers admitted: "The upper limit of 200,000 refugees per year for Germany, which has long been called for, is necessary to ensure successful integration. Our admission capacity is not limitless. Our responsibility is twofold: to our domestic population and to the refugees who are truly in need of protection" (Federal Election Program, CSU, 2017).

However, the Merkel administration resisted these calls. In the words of Chancellor Merkel, the “right to asylum knows no upper limit” (see Bröcker & Quadbeck 2015).

At the other end of the ideological spectrum within the government coalition, the SPD remained more closely aligned with the government coalition’s original position, even though it too supported a more restrictive position, like curbing “illegal migration” while protecting refugees.

Arguably, the policy shift was a response to the rise of the radical right AfD and the failure to reach a compromise on the redistribution of refugees between EU member states. As we see next, these developments made the government coalition adjust its discourse, but rather than adopting new frames, it adjusted its original framing.

4.2 Who are “we”? A country under pressure

In the second period of analysis, the governing parties’ framing of who “we” are shifts toward a more cautious and less idealistic self-understanding. In particular, the cohesion of German society and the European community is perceived to come under increasing pressure from the large number of incoming refugees. First, the government sees the much-lauded humanitarian disposition of Germany’s civil society as becoming overburdened. This view is reflected in weakened public support for admitting refugees and the AfD’s rising vote share in several state elections. In response, while the government still frames Germany in morally cosmopolitan terms as open to helping refugees, it now acknowledges that German civil society bears the burden of this humanitarian help, is increasingly strained, and is becoming divided over the magnitude of refugee inflows:

Ladies and gentlemen, the AfD results in the state elections last weekend were undoubtedly a warning signal. Germany is not immune to right-wing populist parties entering our state parliaments. We know from other European countries—that would be insidious poison for a cosmopolitan, liberal, and just policy. That’s why I say we must look at the reasons for this party’s electoral success, and there are a number of them. One part of the electorate misses a conservative political home. Another part no longer feels represented by the so-called political establishment, and some simply want to express their protest with their vote—whether against the euro bailout or refugee policy. But the AfD’s success shows me one thing above all: the division of society has already begun. (Thomas Oppermann, SPD, March 16, 2016)

Consequently, the number of refugees admitted to Germany must be reduced (and, as we show below, the number of “bogus” refugees in particular) to protect the

country's humanitarian disposition. The reasoning behind this stance is that German society can only keep up its humanitarian orientation if fewer refugees are admitted.

Second, the German government reframes the EU and Germany's position within it. It perceives EU member states to be less committed to common European values than expected and the refugee crisis as a threat to the EU's internal cohesion. This conclusion is reflected in the failure to find a common European solution, which would have involved the redistribution of refugees among EU member states, primarily due to the opposition of Central and Eastern European member states (discussed in [Chapter 6](#) on Poland). Instead, the refugee issue created divisions and conflicts among member states. Some resorted to temporary border closures, reducing free movement within the EU. Thus, in the government's view, Germany's commitment to European unity required finding another kind of solution, namely reducing the number of refugees arriving in the EU by closing the EU–Turkish border via the readmissions agreement. Chancellor Merkel justifies this policy with the following observation about Germany's dependence on the EU, in particular, its freedom of movement regime: “[First], because Germany, in particular, as a country in the center of Europe, benefits more than any other country from the freedom to travel in Europe” (Angela Merkel, CDU, March 16, 2016).

In other words, the government reinterprets Germany's international position as a core country of the EU. While this self-understanding first led the government to search for a common European solution to the crisis involving the redistribution of refugees, it now implies closing the external borders of the EU because of a conflict that threatens to shatter European unity and compromise internal freedom of movement. The need to maintain European unity now trumps the commitment to European values.

Finally, it should be noted that the CDU's sister party, the CSU, also adopts a *cultural* framing of national identity. It picks up the notion of “Leitkultur” promoted by the CDU–CSU in earlier debates about immigration to Germany, that is, the “guiding culture” to which immigrants are expected to adapt. It explicitly defines Christianity as part of this culture:

In Germany, our Leitkultur applies, and it is the benchmark for integration. We represent our Leitkultur confidently, and we should also show it to the outside world. The CSU stands by the validity of the Leitkultur without any ifs or buts. It is a matter of course that everyone who comes to us respects the Leitkultur. Leitkultur encompasses the Christian values that apply in our country, our customs and traditions, and the basic rules of our coexistence. Leitkultur is the opposite of multiculturalism and arbitrariness (Federal Election Program, CSU, 2017).

However, this cultural framing and the notion of “Leitkultur” were not adopted by the other government parties.

4.3 Who are “they”? Refugees that must be distinguished from economic migrants

A similar shift in framing also occurs with regard to the framing of refugees. Already in the summer, speakers had mentioned the need to distinguish between “refugees” who have a right to asylum in Germany and “migrants” who may be sent back. As the debate progresses, and the government coalition needs to justify a more restrictive refugee policy, this distinction is increasingly emphasized (but without rejecting the obligation to grant protection to “genuine refugees”):

We want to and will continue to give protection to those who are in a humanitarian or political emergency. However, this also means that those who are not entitled to protection must leave our country again—ideally through voluntary return programs with initial assistance in the home country, but also through state-ordered repatriation if necessary. (Angela Merkel, CDU, March 21, 2018)

In particular, after reinstating the Dublin Regulation, the government acknowledges that people have a “right to asylum” but emphasizes that they do not have a “right to asylum in a particular country.” Thus, they cannot choose their country of asylum. Essentially, this means that the Dublin Regulation should be adhered to, and refugees should be required to stay in their first arrival countries in the EU:

Refugees have a right to protection, but they have no right to determine for themselves which country must grant this protection. Anyone who wants to enter a certain country must comply with the entry and immigration regulations of that country. Refugees have a right to protection but not a right to freely choose the country of protection. Ladies and gentlemen, Turkey offers Syrian refugees safety. (Thomas Oppermann, SPD, March 16, 2016)

With this framing, it is suggested that Germany can only fulfill its moral and legal obligation to help people fleeing war and persecution by excluding those who do not have a right to receive protection, i.e., migrants who are fleeing economic hardships. Even though their plight is acknowledged, Germany must prioritize the former.

5. The positioning and framing of the left-wing opposition parties: The Greens and the Left

In contrast to the government coalition, the left-wing opposition did not change its policy position and framing over time, which is why the following analysis covers the entire period of analysis. Furthermore, even though there were slight differences between the policy positions of the two left-wing opposition parties, the Left and the Greens, they are similar enough to be described in one chapter. Finally, given that,

as we show, the left-wing opposition used rather similar frames to the government parties in the first phase, the following analysis is kept shorter.

5.1 Positioning: Welcoming refugees

Overall, it is a notable characteristic of the German discourse on admitting refugees that, during the initial phase of the debate, both left-wing opposition parties were basically supportive of the conservative government and the grand coalition's welcoming stance toward refugees and shared most of their frames. As the parliamentary leader of the Left puts it: "I explicitly welcome the fact, Madam Chancellor, that you have opened the doors here for the refugees in Hungary" (Gregor Gysi, the Left, September 9, 2015).

At most, the opposition criticized the government for not tackling the refugee issue before it became an acute crisis over the summer of 2015. In the opposition's view, the government had simply shifted the problem to other countries and preferred to look away, thereby contributing to the escalation of the crisis.

Subsequently, the left-wing opposition became critical of the more restrictive turn of the government's refugee policy after the summer of 2015. This criticism is clearly expressed, for example, in the Greens' manifesto for the 2017 federal elections:

First, the German government responded with humanity. For that, it had our support. But unfortunately, it quickly turned away from this policy. It has massively tightened asylum laws and, together with other European governments, it is pursuing the isolation of the EU. While Trump plans to build a wall, Europe meanwhile hides behind fences and steel wire. This isolation is inhumane and exacerbates the problems in the long run. (Federal Election Program, the Greens, 2017)

In consequence, the opposition voted against the asylum law reforms in parliament (Asylpaket I and II), opposing proposed measures (German [Bundestag 2015](#) and German [Bundestag 2016](#)), such as the extension of the number of safe countries of origin, the replacement of monetary support for refugees with benefits in kind, and the suspension of family reunification for refugees with subsidiary protection. In particular, the opposition also spoke out strongly against the EU–Turkey deal and its intention of limiting the number of refugees coming to Germany:

With the deal we are threatened with, refugees are no longer individuals whose need for protection is examined on an individual basis. They are only numbers in the barter trade between the European Union and Turkey, in which Afghans and Iraqis are completely disregarded. That is inhumane. It is unworthy of Europe, and it is unacceptable. Therefore: Stop it, Ms. Merkel! (Anton Hofreiter, the Greens, March 16, 2016)

Instead of closing the external borders of the EU, the opposition demanded the creation of legal and safe escape routes for refugees seeking asylum in the EU and increasing efforts to combat the causes of flight. As we see next, these policy proposals were based on rather similar frames to those initially used by the government coalition.

5.2 Who are “we”? A Western power partly responsible for the displacement crisis

First, much like the government, the left-wing opposition defines Germany in *morally cosmopolitan* terms as committed to helping people in need, regardless of their background. Likewise, the carrier of this humanitarianism is Germany’s strong civil society. The speakers suggest they are quite surprised by the German civil society’s spontaneous readiness to help refugees. For example, the parliamentary leader of the Greens suggests that this is the first time she feels she can be “proud of Germany.” This statement is significant, considering that especially the German left is very skeptical of any form of patriotism due to Germany’s past of extremist nationalism:

We are currently experiencing a real September fairy tale in Germany: At Munich Central Station, in Dortmund, in Saalfeld. And in many other places, too, people are standing on the platforms with food and drink, with advice and assistance. We are suddenly world champions in helpfulness and philanthropy. “Hosting the world as friends”⁷—that suddenly takes on a whole new meaning. And for the first time, I can say that I am unreservedly proud of my country, were it not for the fact that shelters have been set on fire again. But the Nazis are in the minority, and they will remain so. (Katrin Göring-Eckart, the Greens, September 9, 2015)

In other words, the Germans’ spontaneous reaction to the refugee crisis is interpreted as a sign that Germany is leaving behind its more nationalist past and becoming an open and cosmopolitan society.⁸

⁷ The speaker here refers to the motto of the 2006 FIFA World Cup in Germany. The official English translation of the motto (“a time to make friends”) deviates from the German original and does not carry the same meaning.

⁸ Nevertheless, much like the government, the left-wing opposition parties also point out that civil society’s solidarity might become strained. However, they argue that this is not primarily because of the large number of refugees arriving in Germany but because of the existing social divisions and inequalities, exacerbated by the government’s economic policies. They warn that right-wing populists might exploit these to stir up public opinion against refugees, as expressed in the following quote: “But there are also people who associate fears with it, who believe that they would be better off if there were fewer refugees. I asked them if they were better off before the refugees came. They had to answer in the negative. It’s not a logical argument at all, but we still have an obligation to reduce these abstract fears” (Gregor Gysi, the Left, September 9, 2015). Thus, in the opinion of the left-wing opposition, to sustain Germany’s openness to receiving refugees, it is also necessary to create a more socially just and equitable society so that people do not blame the refugees for their own disadvantage.

Second, the left-wing opposition also emphasizes Germany's *legal* commitment to universalist principles, such as the obligation to admit refugees by virtue of its Constitution and international law. In their program for the 2017 federal elections, the Greens recall the German asylum law and its origin in Germany's historical guilt. They thus draw on the memory of the Nazi past as a central (negative) reference point for Germany's political culture: "In 1949, the Federal Republic of Germany enshrined one of the most liberal rights to asylum in its Basic Law—also as a lesson from German history. We are determined to fight for the individual fundamental right to asylum. Unrestricted access to a fair asylum procedure must be guaranteed" (Federal Election Program, the Greens, 2017).

Third, the opposition parties also point out in *economic* terms that Germany's economy is strong enough to shoulder costs associated with admitting refugees: "A strong country like ours can cope with the reception of people seeking protection. We can organize coexistence and take people along with their fears and anxieties" (Katrin Göring-Eckart, the Greens, September 9, 2015).

Much like the government, some speakers also point out that Germany might even profit from admitting refugees due to its demographic decline:

The refugees are already an opportunity because we have an increasing shortage of workers. The president of the employers' association, therefore, welcomes the influx of refugees. Every year, more Germans die than are born. As it was not unlearned in practical terms, we have to think again about the reasons for this. I'll tell you: It's because we are not a child-friendly society. (Gregory Gysi, the Left, September 9, 2015)

Fourth, like the government, the opposition highlights Germany's multicultural composition and history as a "country of immigration," defining the *cultural* characteristics of the "we": "Our country will change, and it has already changed. Today, 30% of children and young people already have a migration background, and I haven't even counted the 'Ossis' [East Germans] yet" (Katrin Göring-Eckart, the Greens, September 9, 2015).

This statement suggests that Germany is open to receiving refugees, even if they have different cultural backgrounds than many Germans.

There are only slight differences in the way the left-wing opposition justifies the obligation to admit refugees compared to the government. The main difference to the government lies in an additional *moral* dimension of how the opposition defines the German "we." Like the government, the left-wing opposition stresses Germany's commitment to the EU and the need to find a common European solution that honors European values and maintains European unity. But it adds another perspective that implies that Germany has an additional obligation to help refugees. This view derives from the fact that Germany is a capitalist and export-oriented economy—a fact that the left-wing opposition deplors, given that it envisions a more socially just society and equitable world. Several speakers suggest that Germany, as a capitalist and export-oriented economy, is at least partly responsible for the displacement

crises occurring in the Middle East and elsewhere. This judgment is because Germany profits from unequal terms of trade that perpetuate poverty and hunger in underdeveloped regions:

This also includes the fact that our export surpluses prevent weaker countries from building up their own profitable economic structures; on the contrary, in many places, we are destroying small-scale local agriculture and, through our “stinginess is sexy”⁹ in meat consumption, we are letting entire regions of the world drive against the wall. (Katrin-Göring-Eckart, the Greens, September 9, 2015)

The Left party makes a very similar argument:

Every year, about 70 million people die on earth. The most common cause of death is hunger. Every year, about 18 million people on earth die of hunger. However, we have agriculture worldwide that could feed people twice. People who are afraid of starving are fleeing. What is the German government doing about the fact that corporate profit takes precedence over human survival? You have to give an answer to that, too, Madam Chancellor. (Gregor Gysi, the Left, September 9, 2015)

Moreover, Germany not only profits from unequal terms of trade with other countries, but it is also one of the world’s largest arms exporters. Germany has supported military interventions alongside NATO in Afghanistan, among the causes of displacement. In consequence, Germany has a particular international obligation to aid these refugees:

What do the states where the West has also waged war look like? Afghanistan—a catastrophe: Poverty, undemocratic conditions, terrorist suicide attacks, and increasing numbers of refugees. All other parliamentary groups were in favor of the war in Afghanistan. Only the Left was against it and warned of the consequences. (Gregor Gysi, the Left, September 9, 2015)

By pointing out Germany’s complicity in sustaining an unequal world order, the Left adds another argument that suggests that Germany has a moral obligation to admit refugees.

5.3 Who are “they”? People in need with a right to asylum and victims of German arms

Much like the definition of the “we,” the left-wing opposition has a very similar view as the government of who the “refugees” are. First, they define refugees in *moral* terms as people in need fleeing war and persecution, as becomes evident in the following

⁹ Reference to a commercial by a German retail company.

quote: “Wars and war-like conflicts are taking place in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Turkey, Ukraine, and other countries. Wars kill, annihilate, and destroy, and people flee in order not to be killed, not to be annihilated” (Gregor Gysi, the Left, September 9, 2015).

Some speakers also highlight that the plight of refugees does not end when they have escaped their countries of origin. They suggest that it continues even after having reached the EU, as the camps in the first arrival country, Greece, are overcrowded and in dire conditions: “While in Idomeni, children are born and have to live in the dirt and feces, you are pretending that there can be a European solution” (Dietmar Bartsch, the Left, March 16, 2016).

Consequently, much like the government, the opposition adopts a *legal* frame and highlights the refugees’ right to apply for asylum, as guaranteed by the German Constitution and international law: “There are a few principles: Everyone has the right to have it checked whether he or she is entitled to asylum. Because this fundamental right exists, ladies and gentlemen, there can be no abuse of asylum in legal terms. Therefore: Stop using such words” (Katrin Göring-Eckart, the Greens, September 9, 2015).

Finally, in *economic* terms, refugees are also seen as potential labor power, even though this is not seen as a factor that should determine whether they should be admitted or not: “The refugees are already an opportunity because we have an increasing shortage of workers. The president of the employers’ association, therefore, welcomes the influx of refugees. Every year, more Germans die than are born” (Gregor Gysi, the Left, September 9, 2015).

The main differences between the left-wing opposition and the grand coalition in how they frame the refugees lie in two points. First, from a *moral* perspective, the refugees coming to Germany are not only defined as victims of a civil war occurring far away from Germany but partly also as direct victims of German capitalist policies, arms exports, and foreign interventions:

Let me say it again clearly: The refugees are the ambassadors of the wars and misery of this world. Germany and Europe must address the causes, the core of the problem, which lies in the war and the destruction in Syria, Iraq, and the entire region. But that also means an end to arms deliveries to crisis regions, an end to military logic in crisis regions, and thinking about a different world economic order. (Dietmar Bartsch, the Left, March 16, 2016)

Second, regarding the *legal* frame, the opposition does not tend to highlight the legal distinction later made by the government between “mere migrants” and “real refugees.” Even though the Green Party acknowledges that not all people coming to Germany have a right to asylum and must eventually go back (the Left does not mention this point), they reject the accusation that some people who are not “real refugees” might be misusing the asylum system to enter Germany. Instead, as evident in the quote from Katrin Göring-Eckart just cited, the opposition highlights that everyone should have the right to a fair asylum procedure.

As in the grand coalition's discourse, the opposition does not mention *cultural* and *security* frames.

6. The positioning and framing of the radical-right opposition party AfD

6.1 Positioning: Closing Germany's borders

The AfD was founded as a party of fiscal conservatives protesting the government's policies to combat the Euro crisis. During the refugee crisis, the party radicalized, adopting an anti-immigrant and ethnocultural nationalist stance—a development also reflected in a change in the party's leadership in 2015. The AfD's position on refugee policy deviates significantly from the other parties represented in the Bundestag. It is clearly against admitting refugees in Germany, advocates strict border controls (including the construction of physical barriers at Germany's borders), reduced social services for refugees, and quick deportation of nonrecognized asylum seekers. As the electoral program for the 2017 federal elections clearly puts it: "The borders must be closed immediately to put an immediate end to the unregulated mass migration into our country by mostly unqualified asylum seekers" (Federal Election Program, AfD, 2017).

The AfD goes even further. It also demands reforming the German Constitution to eliminate the constitutional right to asylum and renegotiating international refugee treaties like the 1951 Refugee Convention because it considers these instruments no longer adequate for an era of mass migration:

Individual protection and asylum guarantees were created in 1949 for persecuted individuals. They promise the impossible under today's conditions of mass, globalized migration. They cannot be sustained... The mass abuse of the basic right to asylum must be ended by amending the Basic Law. For the same reason, the outdated Geneva Refugee Convention and other supra- and international agreements must be renegotiated with the aim of their adaptation to the threat to Europe from population explosions and migration flows of the globalized present and future. (Federal Election Program, AfD, 2017)

Finally, the AfD rejects cooperation within the EU in matters of refugee and asylum policy, believing the EU should concentrate on securing its external borders, and asylum applications should only be filed only outside of EU borders: "We reject the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). European cooperation should essentially focus on securing the European external border. Asylum applications are, therefore, to be made outside Europe. Wherever European law contradicts these premises, it must be changed or repealed" (Federal Election Program, AfD, 2017).

As we see next, the AfD's policy position is based on a very different understanding of who "we" and the refugees are than the other parties.

6.2 Who are “we”? A sovereign and culturally homogenous nation-state

The AfD’s framing of the “we” differs fundamentally from all the other parties in the German Bundestag. In contrast to the others, it draws a strong boundary between a German in-group and the migrant out-group, rejecting the cosmopolitan self-definition. This position is mainly based on a *legal* frame. The AfD understands the Federal Republic of Germany as a sovereign nation-state and emphasizes the German people’s right to collective self-determination—unbound by universalist principles, as emphasized by the other parties. Note that this understanding of the nation-state goes back to the historical German conception of nationhood. The nation-state is essentially understood as an expression of the will to collective self-determination of the German nation, conceived prior to statehood and, therefore, not its product (Brubaker 1992). This right to collective self-determination essentially implies the right to decide with whom to live and share the national territory, as clearly expressed in the following quote by the AfD’s chairman: “A people’s right to self-determination naturally includes the right to determine with whom I want to live and whom I accept into my community. There is no duty to diversity and colorfulness. There is also no duty to share my state with foreign people” (Alexander Gauland, AfD, March 21, 2018).

As matters of immigration may alter the very composition of the German population and thus touch on the constituent element of the German state, the AfD argues that Germany should not be forced to admit foreigners, for example, by international refugee law. Consequently, the party demands renegotiating the corresponding international agreements, including the European asylum system.

In the view of the AfD, it is the government’s primary task to protect the integrity of the German people and the inviolability of national borders. It argues that the Merkel government has failed to do so by opening Germany’s borders in the late summer of 2015, even though the incoming refugees had been traveling via safe third countries and should, therefore, not have had a right to apply for asylum in Germany. Consequently, the AfD suggests that the rule of law in Germany is no longer effective under the Merkel government:

Mass immigration, Madam Chancellor, continues without limit. An upper limit, demanded once by your Minister of the Interior, does not exist. Only chance and the weather conditions on the Mediterranean Sea decide on the number of new arrivals. Your Minister of the Interior once called it a “reign of injustice” and is confirmed in this by a German higher court, the Koblenz Higher Regional Court, which wrote in the reasoning of its decision of February 14, 2017, the remarkable sentences—I quote with permission of the President: Admittedly, the person concerned has made himself liable to prosecution ... by his unauthorized entry into the Federal Republic ... However, the rule of law in the Federal Republic has been suspended in this area for about one and a half years, and illegal entry into the Federal territory is currently no longer prosecuted. Ladies and gentlemen,

Madam Chancellor: Breach of the law as a permanent condition and no end in sight!
(Alexander Gauland, AfD, March 21, 2018)

Secondly, the AfD's emphasis on the right to collective self-determination of the Germans is essentially based on an *ethnocultural conception* of nationhood. Again, this departs from the self-conception of the other parties represented in the Bundestag, who highlight a civic understanding. This is expressed, for example, by the fact that the AfD seeks to return to the sole *ius sanguinis* principle that characterized German citizenship law until the reform of 2000 (Federal Election Program, AfD, 2017). Being German is thus defined by descent and not—as stipulated by the reform of the citizenship law—by birth on German soil or becoming naturalized. This essentially excludes migrants and their descendants from the definition of who “we” are.

Furthermore, German culture is understood more generally as rooted in Christianity and occidental civilization, which implies drawing a boundary that delineates Islam and Muslim refugees from the German “we.” In the view of the AfD, there may be Muslims living in Germany, but Islam does not, therefore, belong to Germany:

And secondly, it must be clear that the guiding culture of this region of the world and this country is not Islam but our Christian Western culture. And if that is the case, ladies and gentlemen, then the call of the muezzin cannot in the future claim to be as self-evident here as the Christian ringing of church bells. And simply because the vast majority of us in this country do not want that, and we demand to respect that, dear friends. (Jörg Meuthen, AfD, April 30, 2016)

Finally, the AfD does not share the German government's and the other parties' assessment of Germany's *economic* situation. In stark contrast, AfD party representatives see a country in decline, with many people—like pensioners—struggling to get by. But this is not a consequence of a lack of resources. Rather, these resources are unequally distributed because they flow into supporting refugees and asylum seekers instead of Germans:

In the country in which you live well and happy,¹⁰ Madam Chancellor, a Syrian with two wives and six children in Pinneberg is given an entire house and lavish social benefits, while more and more Germans are becoming homeless—there are 6,000 of them here in Berlin alone—and more and more pensioners are impoverished and have to get their food from food banks. When this doesn't add up, the volunteers at the food banks have to put up with abuse, as was recently the case in Essen. Yes, Chancellor, society is disintegrating. (Alexander Gauland, AfD, March 21, 2018)

Completely lacking from the AfD's discourse is a *moral* framing of German society committed to the values of humanitarianism and solidarity with people in need. In their view, Germans come first. The people in real need and who should be helped

¹⁰ A reference to the electoral campaign slogan of the CDU/CSU.

first are poor Germans and not migrants posing as refugees who come to Germany to benefit from its welfare state.

6.3 Who are “they”? Muslims, criminals, and benefit scroungers

In line with its exclusive definition of the German nation, the AfD frames refugees as “others” along several dimensions. At the core of the AfD’s discourse on the refugee crisis is the *legal* reframing of the refugees that have come to Germany and the EU over the course of 2015–16 as “economic migrants.” By placing them in another legal category, the AfD denies them rights associated with refugee status, such as receiving asylum in Germany. In AfD’s view, these persons were not actually forcefully displaced from their home countries by political persecution or civil war. Rather, their movement is understood as part and parcel of a larger migratory movement occurring from poorer to wealthier regions of the world, created by demographic pressures and an increasing wealth gap:

In relation to prosperous Europe, Africa is a poorhouse of the world. Both causes—Africa’s population growth and the prosperity gap with Europe—are creating a migratory pressure that has dimensions of mass migration. Social geography experts have long been able to quantify this migratory pressure. In the Arab region, 23% of the population is estimated to be willing to emigrate; in sub-Saharan Africa, about 37%. In absolute numbers, this currently amounts to around 350 million people willing to migrate, predominantly young men. By 2050, their number will increase to around 950 million. An increasing number of so-called “failed states” and a lack of birth control are contributing to this almost insoluble situation. (Federal Election Program, AfD, 2017)

To gain access to Germany, these migrants only pretend to be refugees by applying for asylum, even though they are not actually politically persecuted at home. They thereby “abuse” the German asylum system. A particularly noteworthy strategy in AfD’s view is using alleged “unaccompanied minors” as “anchors” for their family members:

Unaccompanied alleged minors (UM) abuse the law on aliens and asylum. Almost all of them are male, and between 50% and 80% of those claiming to be minors are actually adults. Their crime rate is disproportionately high, and the state is defenseless. They serve as so-called anchor children for their families to join them later. (Federal Election Program, AfD, 2017)

This legal recategorization of refugees as “migrants” also segues into an *economic* framing. The AfD sees refugees as typically poor and low-qualified migrants, often illiterate, applying for asylum not because they are persecuted but simply to get access

to the German welfare system: “The high level of German social benefits attracts numerous poor immigrants from other EU states as well as from third countries. They abuse the freedom of movement within the EU and the right of asylum to gain access to the welfare system” (Federal Election Program, AfD, 2017).

Due to support from the German welfare state, refugees and asylum seekers are even better off than pensioners or low-skilled German workers, who have worked all their lives honestly: “While the infrastructure of this country is crumbling and the state can no longer protect its citizens, billions and billions are flowing into the reception and alimentionation of illegal immigrants and into the social systems” (Alice Weidel, AfD, May 16, 2018).

Furthermore, the AfD mobilizes a *cultural* frame rejected by the other parties in the Bundestag to draw a symbolic boundary delineating refugees as culturally alien to Germans. They are often subsumed under the label “Muslims” and described as having values and traditions incompatible with German culture:

I don't care whether someone is dark-skinned or light-skinned. I do care how he deals with our traditions, with our culture, and with our language. If he fits into this country, if he lives the traditions, if he does what even Germans sometimes find difficult: mastering our language, reading our literature, he is welcome as a German. But please, I am allowed to have doubts about people who walk around the Kaaba. You know what I am alluding to, and I don't have to elaborate. I don't want to live in a country where Muslims are in the majority. (Alexander Gauland, AfD, June 2, 2016)

Finally, this cultural framing of refugees as Muslims blends into a *security* frame. Qua Muslims, refugees are associated with a number of threats like terrorism, violence against women, and criminality, as exemplified in the following statement: “Neither in the election campaign nor in the coalition agreement nor in the government declaration do terrorists, knife murders, and rapes play a role, nor does the fact that the crime rate among migrants is considerably higher than among natives ...” (Alexander Gauland, AfD, March 21, 2018).

In fact, the economic, cultural, and security framing of refugees often overlap to produce the image of an unqualified and inherently dangerous “Muslim,” as can be seen in the following quote, which was widely remarked upon in the German media: “But I can tell you: Burkas, headscarf girls, state-subsidized knifemen, and other good-for-nothings will not secure our prosperity, economic growth, and, above all, the welfare state” (Alice Weidel, AfD, May 16, 2018).

Overall, these framings of the refugees create strongly exclusive boundaries.

7. Summary and accounting for differences between political parties

Table 5.1 summarizes the policy positions and frames adopted by the different parties regarding the refugee crisis. The most surprising finding of our analysis is the

convergence of the government coalition and the two left-wing opposition parties in the late summer of 2015. As regards the definition of the “we,” both camps adopted a cosmopolitan self-definition. They emphasized humanitarianism and expressed pride in showing the solidarity of German civil society while drawing strong symbolic boundaries to delineate right-wing anti-refugee movements. They also emphasized Germany’s constitutional commitment to human rights generally and the right to asylum specifically, and they converged on the view that Germany, qua member of the EU and historically committed to European unity, should search for a European solution to the crisis. Finally, they emphasized the capacity and even the need for the German economy to absorb refugees.

Questions of cultural identity only played a minor role in the debate, which is notable, as this was one of the most salient issues in previous immigration debates in Germany. Correspondingly, the boundaries between refugees and the “we” were blurred. Refugees were framed as people in dire need who not only require help but also have the constitutionally guaranteed right to apply for and receive asylum. Furthermore, they were considered potential human capital for the German labor market. In contrast, security and cultural concerns were de-emphasized; the latter, rather surprisingly, given the controversial earlier debates about integrating immigrants of Muslim background in Germany. Overall, the left-wing opposition only differed from the government by emphasizing Germany’s moral obligation as an export-oriented economy and arms exporter, which they claimed was a cause of displacement worldwide.

As we have seen, however, over the course of the crisis, the position and framing of the two camps began to diverge somewhat. The grand coalition moved toward a more restrictive position. However, this move was not based on completely new frames but rather on a shift in emphasis within the original framing. The main argument for this move was that Germany could only continue to practice humanitarianism if it did not overburden its reception capacities. As regards the “we,” it evinced an increasing concern over the resilience of Germany’s civil society and its humanitarian disposition, given the growing support for the radical right, as well as the vulnerability of European unity, given the rift between EU member states over the redistribution of refugees. And as regards the “others,” the grand coalition began to emphasize the legal distinction between “refugees” and “migrants,” distinguishing between those who have a right to stay to receive protection and those who can be sent back because they are not threatened in their countries of origin—even though speakers continued to acknowledge everyone’s right to apply for asylum. In contrast, the left-wing opposition stuck with its original position of openness. In particular, it identified another reason for the German public’s growing skepticism regarding the admission of refugees: the social inequalities and divisions caused by the government’s economic policies, which led people to falsely blame the refugees.

In contrast to these two camps, the emerging radical right-wing AfD took a very different position, supporting the closure of German borders. This position was based on a communitarian definition of who “we” are and strong boundaries delineating refugees. As regards the “we,” the AfD highlighted the sovereignty of the German people and its right to decide with whom to live on its territory,

thereby rejecting external constraints on national self-determination imposed by international law and human rights. Furthermore, the AfD defined the German people in ethnocultural terms as a community of descent, with a Christian and occidental cultural imprint, in stark contrast to Islam. Finally, it argued that Germans, particularly the most vulnerable, are less well off than suggested by the government because welfare support goes to refugees. This understanding of who “we” are corresponds with strong boundaries delineating the refugees. They were construed as economic migrants ineligible for the right to asylum, culturally alien Muslims incompatible with German culture, economic burdens on the German welfare state, and potential security threats with a high crime rate.

How can we make sense of the positions and framings of the different political parties with regard to cleavage theory? In the decades prior to the refugee crisis, the German party system was essentially structured along two lines of conflict, economic and cultural (Niedermayer 2018). The economic dimension opposed the more state-centered SPD (which moved toward the center under the labor market reforms of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder in the 2000s, thus creating an opening for the emergence of the Left) on the one side, and the more market-oriented CDU as well as the FDP on the other. For much of the postwar period, party competition was essentially dominated by the two “Volksparteien,” which had typically governed with a junior partner. With the rise of the Green Party out of the ecological movements in the 1980s, “cultural” issues like gender equality, environmental protection, and postmaterialist values became politicized, while the CDU–CSU occupied the more value-conservative pole (in particular, the CSU).

In contrast to other European countries, until 2013, Germany had not witnessed the establishment of a radical right-wing party that politicized questions of national sovereignty and immigration (though smaller parties occasionally managed to enter state-level parliaments). One reason is that the CDU–CSU had mostly managed to integrate Germany’s culturally conservative electorate. Indeed, in earlier immigration debates, the CDU–CSU frequently took a restrictive and even anti-immigrant position. A second reason is the taboo on right-wing radicalism in Germany’s political culture due to the country’s Nazi past, which for several decades hindered the establishment of a party to the right of the CDU–CSU. These circumstances began to change with the Euro crisis, as a group of conservative economics professors and disenchanted members of the CDU founded the AfD in 2013 to protest the government’s bailout policy and demand Germany’s exit from the eurozone.

The refugee crisis acted as an accelerator for restructuring the German party system. One of the most remarkable features of the political response to the refugee crisis is that the CDU, under the leadership of Angela Merkel, initially moved into what can broadly be described as a “cosmopolitan camp” along with the three left-wing parties (the SPD, the Greens, and the Left). They interpreted Germany in cosmopolitan terms and emphasized commitment to universalist principles, including the obligation to help the refugees. Arguably, this created an opening to the right for the AfD, which now combined its originally Euroskeptic position with an ethnonationalist and anti-immigrant attitude, and anti-establishment rhetoric,

Table 5.1 Positionings and framings in the debate on the admission of refugees in Germany

	Government coalition (CDU–CSU, SPD)		Left-wing opposition (the Left, Greens)		Radical-right opposition (AfD)	
Policy position	Initially welcoming toward refugees, but more restrictive over time ^a		Welcoming toward refugees, critical of the government’s restrictive turn		Critical of the government, supports closing borders and rejection of refugees	
Framing	Who are “we”?	Who are “they”?	Who are “we”?	Who are “they”?	Who are “we”?	Who are “they”?
Moral	A humanitarian country with a strong civil society (but which has to be protected against overburdening)	People in need	(1) Like the government, but emphasis on social inequalities as threats to solidarity (2) As capitalist economy and arms exporter, Germany is partly responsible for the refugee crisis	(1) Like the government (2) Refugees are, in part, also displaced due to Germany’s capitalist policies	—	—
Legal	Bound by international law, human rights, and the German Constitution	All refugees have a right to apply for asylum (though there is a distinction between refugees and migrants)	Like the government	Like the government, but less emphasis on the legal distinction between migrants and refugees	A sovereign nation-state not bound by international law	Rejection of the category “refugee,” use of the category “migrant”

Continued

Table 5.1 *Continued*

	Government coalition (CDU–CSU, SPD)		Left-wing opposition (the Left, Greens)		Radical-right opposition (AfD)	
Policy position	Initially welcoming toward refugees, but more restrictive over time ^a		Welcoming toward refugees, critical of the government’s restrictive turn		Critical of the government, supports closing borders and rejection of refugees	
Framing	Who are “we”?	Who are “they”?	Who are “we”?	Who are “they”?	Who are “we”?	Who are “they”?
International	Committed to the fundamental values of the EU (and to its unity)	—	Like the government	—	—	—
Economic	A strong economy, but which faces labor market shortages	Refugees are a human capital	Like the government	Like the government	A struggling economy because of refugees	Low skilled, illiterate, and an economic burden
Cultural	An open and tolerant country of immigration	—	Like the government	—	A culturally homogenous community defined by common descent	Muslims incompatible with the German culture
Security	—	—	—	—	—	Criminals and terrorists

Note: ^a The government’s shift in framing is indicated in brackets.

to occupy the “communitarian” pole of the political space (see also Bremer & Schulte-Cloos 2019).¹¹

The observed shift in the policy position and framing of the CDU–CSU over the fall and winter of 2015–16 can be explained against this background. It reacted to two pressures: First, the government failed to coordinate a common European response to the refugee crisis, which would have reduced the pressure on Germany as the main refugee-hosting country in the EU. Second, the AfD managed to establish itself to the right of CDU–CSU, running high in the polls and gaining ground in state elections. As Anthony Downs (1957) noted, political parties seek to maximize votes and will shift their policy positions in line with the ideological shifts in the electorate. Thus, the more conservative CSU pressured the CDU to adopt some of the AfD’s more restrictive stances. The CDU was thus confronted with a cross-pressure: On the one hand, the logic of vote maximization, and on the other, the constraints imposed by its original humanitarian framing of the refugee crisis. As we have seen, it reacted by adjusting its discourse, keeping the original frames intact but shifting emphasis to support a more restrictive position.

8. Appendix

Table 5.2 Overview of sampled debates in the German Bundestag, political statements and election programs

Date	Public forum	Topic	Speaker	Party affiliation
August 31, 2015	Summer press conference	Current topics of domestic and foreign affairs	Merkel, Angela (Chancellor)	CDU
September 9, 2015	Bundestag	General budget debate	Merkel, Angela (Chancellor)	CDU
			Kauder, Volker	CDU
			Hasselfeldt, Gerda	CSU
			Oppermann, Thomas	SPD
			Gerster, Martin	SPD
			Gysi, Gregor	the Left
			Göring-Eckart, Katrin	Alliance 90/the Greens

Continued

¹¹ However, it should be noted that there is little evidence for a polarization of German society along the cosmopolitan–communitarian cleavage (see e.g., Mau et al. 2020). Immigration is among the most controversial issues, while public opinion is less polarized on other issues related to cosmopolitanism and communitarianism (e.g., diversity or the EU).

Table 5.2 *Continued*

Date	Public forum	Topic	Speaker	Party affiliation
March 16, 2016	Bundestag	Government declaration on the European Council	Merkel, Angela (Chancellor)	CDU
			Högl, Eva	SPD
			Bartsch, Dietmar	the Left
			Oppermann, Thomas	SPD
			Hofreiter, Anton	Alliance 90/the Greens
April 30, 2016	5th Federal Party Convent of the AfD	Speech of the chairman of the AfD Baden-Württemberg	Meuthen, Jörg	AfD
June 2, 2016	Party rally of the AfD in Elsterwerda, Brandenburg	Speech of the chairman of the AfD Brandenburg	Gauland, Alexander	AfD
April 22–23, 2017	2017 Federal Elections	Election Program: “Programm für Deutschland”	—	AfD
April 28–30, 2017	2017 Federal Elections	Election Program: “Denken wir neu”	—	FDP
June 16–18, 2017	2017 Federal Elections	Election Program: “Zukunft wird aus Mut gemacht”	—	Alliance 90/the Greens
June 25, 2017	2017 Federal Elections	Election Program: “Zeit für mehr Gerechtigkeit”	—	SPD
July 3, 2017	2017 Federal Elections	Election Program: “Für ein Deutschland, in dem wir gut und gerne leben”	—	CDU/CSU
July 9–11, 2017	2017 Federal Elections	Election Program: “Die Zukunft, für die wir kämpfen!”	—	the Left
July 17, 2017	2017 Federal Elections	Election Program: “Der Bayernplan. Klar für unser Land”	—	CSU

Date	Public forum	Topic	Speaker	Party affiliation
March 16, 2018	Bundestag	General budget debate	Weidel, Alice	AfD
March 21, 2018	Bundestag	Government declaration after the formation of the coalition government	Merkel, Angela (Chancellor)	CDU
			Gauland, Alexander	AfD
May 12, 2018	69th Federal Party Convent of the FDP	Speech of the chairman of the FDP	Lindner, Christian	FDP

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6

Defending national sovereignty and cultural homogeneity

Poland's policy of closed doors toward Syrian refugees

1. Introduction

As we have seen in Chapter 5, the number of refugees and asylum seekers from the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa arriving in the EU peaked in 2015 with almost 1.2 million first-time applicants (Eurostat 2023b). While Germany has granted protection to almost one million refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan by the end of 2022 (Statistisches Bundesamt 2023), only a few hundred were granted protection in Poland (AIDA—Asylum Information Database 2023). Even though almost no refugees from the Middle East or North Africa arrived in Poland, the issue triggered an intense political debate and arguably shaped the outcome of the 2015 elections, which saw the populist right-wing Law and Justice Party (in Polish, “Prawo i Sprawiedliwość,” abbreviated as PiS) rise to power on an anti-immigrant platform, in government until late 2023. Along with a few other Central and Eastern European member states like Hungary, the PiS government persisted in its refusal to participate in any kind of common European solution that would involve relocating refugees to Poland, despite considerable political pressure from other member states and even an infringement procedure launched by the EU Commission.¹

However, the Polish government's refusal to accept refugees from the Middle East and North Africa was not a policy that applied equally to all refugees. During the same period, the Polish government signaled they were ready to accept refugees from neighboring Ukraine following the protests against the regime of Viktor Yanukovich in 2014, the ensuing conflict between government forces and pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas region, and Russia's annexation of Crimea.² This promise was put into practice following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 when Poland

¹ Poland (along with Hungary) opposed the long-negotiated reform of the Common European Asylum System adopted by the EU Council in the summer of 2023. Furthermore, Polish authorities sealed the border and pushed back Middle Eastern and North African asylum seekers traveling via Belarus in the winter of 2021–22. The authoritarian Belarusian government under Alexander Lukashenko had extended visas for these asylum seekers to come to Belarus and then motivated them to cross the border to the EU in revenge for EU sanctions against the regime.

² Since the outbreak of the conflict and until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Poland received several hundred thousand migrants from Ukraine, but mostly as labor migrants. During this

supported the activation of the EU's temporary protection directive and opened its borders to Ukrainian refugees (Council of the European Union 2022). Of the around 3.8 million Ukrainians that have registered for temporary protection in the EU up to the end of 2022, Poland has registered around one million, one of the largest numbers in the EU (Eurostat 2023c).³

This chapter aims to understand the restrictive Polish response to the Syrian and Middle Eastern refugee crisis of 2015–16 against the background of its welcoming position to receiving Ukrainian refugees in the same period. Our analysis focuses on the debates about receiving Syrian and Middle Eastern refugees via the EU relocation mechanism, taking into account the debates about admitting Ukrainian refugees occurring in 2014 only as a contrasting case. Our analysis does not include the debates about the refugee movement from Ukraine following the Russian invasion in 2022. However, the position Poland took in 2014 with regard to refugees from Ukraine was effectively put into practice in 2022 without a change of framing, as shown in an additional analysis we conducted after completing this book (Drewski & Gerhards 2024).

At the heart of the PiS party's opposition to admitting Syrian and Middle Eastern refugees is an understanding of Poland as a culturally homogenous, Christian nation unable to assimilate refugees of Muslim background and with no particular moral obligation to help them. This framing is complemented by an understanding of Poland as an underdog EU member state whose national sovereignty is threatened by the EU and larger powers in its neighborhood (principally Germany) by imposing "their" refugees on Poland. This interpretation of Polish identity takes up the collective memory of national "victimhood," originating in Poland's long history of foreign occupation (Gerhards et al. 2017). At the same time, the PiS party's framing of the Polish "we" leads to a different position regarding Ukrainian refugees. In line with its understanding of Poland as a victim of larger powers, PiS argues that Poland should admit refugees from Ukraine because they, like Poles have been in the past, are victims of Russian aggression. In addition, Ukrainians are seen as culturally close to and having many personal ties to Poles, unlike refugees from the Middle East and North Africa.

In contrast, the Civic Platform (in Polish, "Platforma Obywatelska," abbreviated as PO), which was the main opposition to the PiS government (and forms the government since 2023), advocated a more moderate policy of accepting a certain number of refugees from Syria and the Middle East in compliance with EU commitments. This position is based on a very different interpretation of Polish national identity and

period, Poland did not accept many Ukrainians as refugees or grant them protection status because authorities considered that displaced Ukrainians could still find shelter in other parts of Ukraine (Kowalski 2016: 976–977).

³ These numbers reflect the status quo at the end of 2022. They are in constant flux due to the evolving situation.

collective memory of Poland's history. PO draws on a self-understanding of Poland as a nation with a forgotten multicultural history open to welcoming foreigners, even if they practice another religion. Additionally, PO stresses Poland's commitment to the EU as a community of solidarity and its indebtedness to its European partners for supporting Poland at other times, for example, when it strove to "return to Europe" from Soviet influence. When it comes to Ukrainians, the PO shares the view that Poland should be ready to admit Ukrainian refugees, in particular, because they are victims of foreign aggression, and Poles have their own historical experience of what it means to be refugees.

With reference to the theory of political cleavages, one could say that Poland is the quintessential case of a party system divided along the cleavage between "cosmopolitans" and "communitarians" within our sample of countries (de Wilde et al. 2019). Migration and asylum were not important political issues prior to the eruption of the "European refugee crisis" in 2015. However, they have contributed to deepening an already existing sociocultural divide between defenders of national sovereignty and conservative values represented by PiS on the one hand and advocates of cultural liberalization and European integration represented by PO on the other, both of which have fundamentally different views on Polish national identity (Lewicki & Mandes 2015; Sałek & Sztajdel 2019). We argue that the position of the two major parties with regard to admitting Syrian, Middle Eastern, and North African refugees and participating in the EU relocation mechanism can be well explained by this cosmopolitan–communitarian divide, in contrast to some other country cases. The Ukrainian displacement, instead, does not seem to have fed into this cleavage, as Poland's major political parties took similar positions.

Our analysis builds on other studies that have conducted discourse analyses of the Polish response to the refugee crisis. Most notably, Piotr Cap (2018), Krzysztof Jaskułowski (2019), and Michał Krzyżanowski (2018, 2020) have analyzed statements by the Law and Justice Party. Arguing from the perspective of "critical discourse analysis" and "securitization theory," they show how PiS has construed refugees and immigrants as a "threat" to the Polish nation, thereby drawing on Islamophobic and racist repertoires. Further studies have also conducted comparative analyses of media discourse, coming to similar conclusions (e.g., Krotofil & Motak 2018; Troszyński & El-Ghamari 2022). Our findings coincide with those of previous studies, but we go further by comparing PiS with PO. This step allows us to move beyond the securitization framework and to systematically disentangle the images of the "self" and the "other" that drive the respective party positions. Furthermore, in contrast to previous studies, we explore the cultural repertoires that different parties draw upon in their framing. Finally, we contrast the discourse on the Syrian and Middle Eastern refugee crisis with the discourse on the Ukraine crisis. We can show that the national self-understanding driving the rejection of Syrian and Middle Eastern refugees implied a welcoming position toward the admission of Ukrainian refugees.

2. Background of the debate

2.1 Country information

Located in Central and Eastern Europe, Poland looks back on a troubled past. Tracing back its history to one of the most powerful and largest states in Europe (the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth), Poland suffered from foreign occupation, genocide, and the redrawing of borders over the centuries that followed. The contemporary Third Polish Republic emerged from the collapse of the Soviet-backed communist regime and the transition to liberal democracy after 1989. A member of the EU since 2004, Poland is the sixth largest member state (with a population of 38 million), but despite rapid economic growth during the last decades, it remains well below the EU average in terms of socioeconomic development. As we see in this chapter, the political debate on admitting refugees to Poland is deeply embedded in questions of national history, identity, and the place of Poland in Europe (for overviews, see [Romaniszyn & Nowak 2003](#); [Lewicki & Mandes 2015](#)). Therefore, in order to understand this debate, it is necessary to review the following issues: the exceptional ethnic homogeneity of Polish society and the centrality of Catholicism for national identity, Poland's long history of foreign occupation, and its post–Cold War orientation to the West, as well as the strained relationship with the EU in recent years.

Poland is ethnically one of the most homogenous countries in the EU. Around 97 percent of its population identifies as Polish ([CIA 2022](#)). This homogeneity is primarily the result of more recent history, namely World War II and the Potsdam Agreement of the Allied powers. The Second Polish Republic, established during the interwar period, had still been a multiethnic state, with sizable German, Jewish, Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Lithuanian minorities, constituting approximately a third of the total population ([Romaniszyn & Nowak 2003](#): 270–272). But Poland's Jewish population was exterminated by the German occupation forces during World War II. Furthermore, following the Potsdam Agreement, Polish borders were moved several hundred kilometers westwards, rendering the eastern parts of its territory—and with it the Ukrainian and Belarusian populations—to the Soviet Union. On the other side, many ethnic Germans had already fled the advance of the Soviet army, and after the war, they were expelled from Polish territory and forced to move to Germany. Further supporting ethnic homogeneity is the fact that, for many decades, Poland has been a country of emigration rather than immigration. Only since Poland's EU membership did immigration rates increase, mostly from neighboring Eastern European countries like Ukraine and Belarus ([Kaczmarczyk et al. 2014](#)).

Along with being exceptionally homogenous, Poland is also one of the most religious countries in Europe, with more than 85 percent of the population identifying with Christian Catholicism ([CIA 2022](#)). Historically, the Catholic faith served as the key marker of Polish national identity, distinguishing Poles from Protestant Prussia to the West and Orthodox Christianity to the East ([Porter 2001](#)). For centuries, the Catholic Church has played an important role in Polish society and politics,

encouraging the formation of a Polish nation. This influence is exemplified by such mythical narratives of Poland as the “*antemurale christianitatis*,” the defender of Christian Europe against the expansion of the Ottoman Empire in Europe in the seventeenth century. During the Polish People’s Republic, the Church was closely allied to the Solidarity movement and supported the resistance against communism, most visibly through the figure of the Polish Pope John Paul II. Religion continues to have a deep impact on moral attitudes regarding issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and diversity, making Polish society, on average, one of the most culturally conservative in the EU (Gerhards 2007).

A further key to understanding the Polish case is its long history of partition and foreign occupation by its powerful neighbors, in particular Prussia-Germany to the West and Russia to the East. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, established in the sixteenth century, was at that time one of the largest and most powerful states in Europe. However, following a period of decline at the end of the eighteenth century, its territory was successively occupied in the so-called three partitions by Prussia, Austria, and Russia, effectively eliminating the Polish state from the map. Only after World War I, more than a hundred years later, and by virtue of the Versailles Treaty, was Poland reestablished as an independent state. However, independent statehood did not last long, as German and Soviet forces again occupied Poland in 1939, marking the beginning of World War II. After the war, the Polish People’s Republic remained a satellite state of the Soviet Union until 1989. This troubled history has nurtured a narrative of national victimhood and mistrust of the two larger powers in its vicinity, Germany and Russia (Romaniszyn & Nowak 2003; Gerhards et al. 2017).

After the Iron Curtain fell and the communist regime collapsed, Poland quickly oriented westward by joining NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004, along with ten other Central and Eastern European states. Membership in the EU was legitimized by the slogan of “return to Europe” (Romaniszyn & Nowak 2003; Risse 2010: 76–81; Lewicki & Mandes 2015). This idea suggested that Poland had historically been an integral part of Western Europe, sharing its heritage of Western Christianity and the Enlightenment, but was cut off from the West and left to the Soviet Union by the arbitrary division of Europe imposed at the Yalta Conference. Accessing the EU meant shaking off the yoke of Russian influence and reclaiming its rightful place among European nations. Indeed, while support for the Eastern Enlargement among the population of the “old” EU member states was guarded, a large majority of the Polish population supported EU membership—78 percent voted in favor during the 2003 accession referendum. However, from the beginning, there was a more nationalist counter-narrative, according to which EU membership would endanger Polish national identity and Christian values.

Poland undertook a profound socioeconomic and political “shock therapy” to prepare for EU membership and to meet the EU accession criteria, making it the model case among the Enlargement countries (Ther 2016). After the accession, Poland’s economy profited from EU membership, being the largest net recipient of EU funds. It has shown a positive economic performance, increasing its GDP per capita from

US\$6681 in 2004 (adjusted to current value) to US\$18,321 in 2022 (World Bank 2023b). But its GDP per capita remains well below the EU average (US\$37,150 in 2020).

Despite the economic payoff of EU membership, Polish–EU relations cooled down over the years, not least because of the dispute about migration and refugee policy, bringing to power the Euroskeptic right-wing populist Law and Justice Party in 2015. It capitalized on concerns over immigration, cultural liberalization (regarding issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and the role of the Church), as well as fears over ceding further national sovereignty to the EU (though without questioning Poland’s EU membership) (Sałek & Sztajdel 2019). In government, the Law and Justice Party proceeded to dismantle judiciary autonomy, curtail freedom of the press, and undermine minority rights, provoking a confrontation with the EU over the rule of law and democracy (Pirro & Stanley 2022). According to the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index, which measures the quality of democracy and the rule of law from a comparative perspective, Poland’s score fell from 0.79 in 2015 to 0.43 in 2022, one of the lowest in the EU (second only to Hungary) (Varieties of Democracy 2023). Even though this “democratic backsliding” only occurred after the political debates on immigration analyzed in this chapter, it is important to keep in mind in order to understand the Polish debate.

2.2 Critical discourse moments: The relocation of refugees in the EU and the conflict in Ukraine

The admission of refugees and asylum seekers in Poland was not a salient issue prior to the politicization of the arrival of refugees in 2015.⁴ In this section, we focus on two critical discourse moments: the plan to relocate refugees within the EU as a response to the Syrian refugee crisis, and the migration from Ukraine, increasing since the outbreak of the civil war in 2014. As mentioned above, we do not consider the movement of refugees from Ukraine after the full-scale Russian invasion of 2022.

The relocation of refugees in the EU

As we have seen in Chapter 5, the so-called “European refugee crisis” erupted in 2015, when around 1.2 million asylum seekers escaping conflicts and civil wars in North Africa and the Middle East, mainly Syria, but also Afghanistan and Iraq, sought

⁴ In the decades following the fall of the communist regime and the establishment of democracy, Poland only received a limited—though over time slowly rising—number of refugees (e.g., from conflicts in Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s and Chechnya at the beginning of the 2000s) (Sobczak-Szelc et al. 2023). Polish refugee policy was mainly driven by the country’s insertion into the liberal international order and EU accession in 2004. Poland signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and its Protocol in 1991 and updated its legislation accordingly. The right to apply for asylum was enshrined in the Constitution of 1997 (Article 56(1)). Poland’s current asylum law mainly reflects the implementation of EU law. Next to asylum (domestic protection), Poland grants international refugee status, subsidiary protection, temporary protection, and tolerated or humanitarian stay. Overall, the refugee crisis of 2015–16 did not lead to major legislative reforms in Poland. However, in practical terms, the Polish response represented a reversal from decades of Europeanization of its refugee and asylum policy.

refuge in the EU (overview in [Niemann & Zaun 2018](#)). Next to Germany and the first arrival countries, the largest per capita share of refugees was taken in by Austria and Sweden, while the lowest numbers were recorded in Eastern and Southeastern EU member states. Poland was neither a major destination country nor a transit country on one of the migratory routes. This geographical position can be clearly observed in the statistics. At the peak of the European refugee crisis in 2015, Poland received only 285 first-time asylum applications from Syrian citizens, fifty-five from Iraq, and fifteen from Afghanistan ([Eurostat 2023a](#)). Between 2015 and the end of 2022, only around 300 Syrians were granted protection in Poland, while the main country of origin of refugees in Poland was Russia ([AIDA—Asylum Information Database 2023](#)). However, the European refugee crisis nevertheless triggered a highly controversial public debate in Poland and was arguably one of the reasons why the right-wing PiS, running a fierce anti-immigrant campaign, defeated the ruling Civic Platform in the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections.

The debate in Poland was triggered by the EU's attempt to formulate a coordinated response to the refugee crisis, which mainly involved relocating refugees from the overburdened first-arrival countries. In September 2015, the EU Commission presented an emergency plan to relocate 120,000 refugees from Greece and Italy (Hungary declined to be included), on top of the relocation of another 40,000 that had already been agreed on earlier that year (COM (2015) 450) ([European Commission 2015](#)). Each EU member state was allocated a quota based on population and GDP. While countries like Germany and France were allocated more than 31,000 and 24,000 refugees, respectively, Poland would have had to accept around 9000. The relocation plan was adopted by a qualified majority in the Council, pushed mainly by Germany, Austria, and Sweden, but vehemently opposed by several Central and Eastern European member states, most prominently by the Hungarian government of Viktor Orbán ([Zaun 2018](#)). Poland, at that time still governed by the center-right and pro-European Civic Platform under Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz, initially agreed to cooperate with the relocation (though agreeing to take a lower share than demanded, around 7000 refugees). However, the PiS government elected in October 2015 refused to comply with the plan. Consequently, in 2017, the EU Commission launched an infringement procedure against Poland (as well as Hungary and the Czech Republic) before the Court of Justice of the EU.

While the plan agreed on by the Council was an emergency measure, in May 2016, the European Commission proposed a more fundamental reform of the Dublin Regulation (COM (2016) 270) ([European Commission 2016](#)). The refugee crisis had laid bare the weakness of the Regulation, in particular the requirement that asylum seekers have to apply for asylum in the country where they first enter the EU, as this might cause an overburdening of the asylum systems of first-arrival countries. Thus, at the heart of the Commission's proposal was a "corrective allocation mechanism," according to which refugees would be automatically relocated between member states in periods of crisis. Member states not complying with the plan would have to pay a proportionate solidarity contribution. Again, Poland, along with the "Visegrád

group” (Hungary, Czech Republic, and Slovakia), most vehemently opposed the plan. Instead, the group proposed a “voluntary mechanism” for distributing refugees, allowing member states to opt out by providing financial assistance or expertise.⁵

The Ukrainian crisis and war with Russia

A year before the eruption of the refugee crisis, the EU was confronted with another major crisis, this time in its immediate Eastern neighborhood. In late 2013, massive anti-government protests erupted in Ukraine following the last-minute decision of its President Victor Yanukovich to backtrack on a long-negotiated economic association agreement with the EU (the so-called “Euromaidan” protests). Yanukovich was pressured to do so by the Russian government under Vladimir Putin, which sought to stop an eastward expansion of the EU into what it perceived to be the Russian zone of influence, as Ukraine had been part of the Soviet Union until 1991 and is seen by Russia as the cradle of the Russian people. Despite a violent crackdown, the protests eventually led to the toppling of the Ukrainian government. The conflict subsequently escalated into a civil war between Ukrainian and pro-Russian forces, primarily in the Eastern Ukrainian Donbas region, as two provinces sought to become independent from Ukraine and move closer to the Russian Federation. The Russian government supported this endeavor militarily and annexed the Crimean Peninsula in February 2014, alleging the need to protect the resident Russian minority. The military conflict escalated throughout the summer of 2014, and despite ensuing peace efforts (the so-called “Minsk agreements”), interspersed fighting continued until early 2022.⁶ The conflict erupted in full in February 2022, as the Russian government decided to send troops into Ukrainian territory in an all-out invasion, initially advancing toward the capital Kyiv but then retreating and occupying Ukraine’s southeastern border regions. As already mentioned, these latter events can no longer be considered in the analysis.

The conflict in Ukraine had already provoked a massive wave of displacement between 2014 and prior to the Russian invasion in 2022. At its peak in 2015, up to 1.6 million Ukrainians were displaced internally, and around 340,000 refugees and asylum seekers sought refuge in other countries (UNHCR 2023). At the same time, the deteriorating economic situation (Ukraine’s GDP fell by around 10 percent in 2014 and 2015: see World Bank 2023a) and the general feeling of insecurity due to the conflict also triggered a wave of emigration from Ukraine, mostly in the form of labor migration toward the EU and Poland in particular (Jaroszewicz & Piechal 2016). Following the Russian invasion of 2022, the number of internally displaced persons and refugees exploded. The war displaced around 5.9 million Ukrainians internally and 5.7 million abroad by the end of 2022 (UNHCR 2023).

⁵ In September 2020, the EU Commission presented a new proposal to overhaul the EU’s Common European Asylum System (the “New Pact on Asylum and Migration”). It took until mid-2023 for EU interior ministers to reach an agreement on this proposal, which included a solidarity mechanism and detention centers at the EU’s external borders (Council of the European Union 2023). Despite the largely restrictive nature of the reform plan, the Polish and Hungarian governments voted against it in the Council. Negotiations continue at the time of writing.

⁶ It is estimated that around 13,000 people were killed during the conflict as of 2020 (OHCHR 2020: 8).

The Polish governments—both the PO and PiS—have pursued an active foreign policy during the Ukraine crisis. Poland had already played a leading role in the EU’s Eastern Partnership initiative, which sought to draw Ukraine and other post-Soviet Eastern European states closer to the EU. Consequently, the Polish government vocally supported the Euromaidan protests and, along with Germany and France, mediated between the Yanukovich government and protesters, paving the way for new elections. The Polish government has been an outspoken critic of Russia, calling for tougher sanctions due to Russia’s involvement in Ukraine. Poland has also repeatedly declared it is prepared to receive refugees and asylum seekers from Ukraine in Poland should the conflict escalate (Jóźwiak & Piechowska 2017), as effectively occurred in early 2022. After the invasion, the Polish government pushed its partners to support Ukraine with arms.

Poland had already been a major destination country for Ukrainian migrants and temporal workers in the years leading up to the conflict. This situation can be explained by cultural similarities, close historical ties, Poland’s labor market opportunities, and liberal migration and visa policy toward its Eastern neighbors; in 2017, Ukrainians were granted visa-free travel to the EU (Brunarska et al. 2016). With the onset of the Ukraine crisis, the number of Ukrainian migrants and temporal workers arriving in Poland increased significantly.⁷ The number of asylum seekers from Ukraine increased after 2014 but at significantly lower numbers, to around 2000 applicants in 2014, then declining again (Eurostat 2023a).⁸ After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Polish government, along with other EU member states, decided to grant temporary protection to Ukrainian refugees (Council of the European Union 2022), meaning that no individual asylum assessment is necessary. It includes a one-year residence permit (up to three years), access to employment, housing, education, social services, and free movement within the EU (European Council 2023). Poland hosts one of the largest shares of Ukrainian refugees in the EU, with around one million registered under temporary protection by the end of 2022 (Eurostat 2023c).

2.3 Description of the forum, political actors, and debates

As in the other chapters, we focus our attention on parliamentary debates. The Polish parliament consists of two chambers: the Sejm (460 members) and the Senate (one hundred members). Members of the Sejm are elected by district according to party-list proportional representation. Senators, in turn, are elected by first-past-the-post in

⁷ Due to the complexity of administrative data collected in Poland, it is difficult to pin down the exact numbers (Jaroszewicz 2018). In 2013, around 38,000 Ukrainians held temporal or permanent residency in Poland. This number increased to more than 214,000 in 2019 (Statistics Poland 2020: 132). Additionally, an increasing number of Ukrainians entered Poland on temporary work permits, at a magnitude of around 600,000 in 2018 (Jaroszewicz 2018: 8).

⁸ However, most asylum applications were rejected by Polish authorities based on having an “internal protection alternative,” meaning that Ukrainian refugees were assumed to be able to find protection within their own country (Kowalski 2016: 976–977).

single-member districts. As both chambers are involved in law-making, we included debates in both in our analysis.

Our analyses cover two parliamentary cycles in Poland. During the first cycle (2011 to 2015), the center-right Civic Platform held the majority of the Sejm and the Senate with 39.2 percent and 35.6 percent of the popular vote, respectively. It formed an alliance with the Polish People's Party (in Polish, "Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe," abbreviated as PSL), which received 8.4 percent (Sejm) and 9.4 percent (Senate) of the vote. Donald Tusk was elected prime minister, followed by Ewa Kopacz from the PO party. The main opposition was formed by the populist right Law and Justice Party led by Jarosław Kaczyński, which obtained 29.9 percent (Sejm) and 26.9 percent (Senate) of the popular vote. The left-wing opposition was formed by the Palikot Movement (in Polish, "Ruch Palikota," abbreviated as RP), with 10 percent of the vote for the Sejm, and Democratic Left Alliance (in Polish, "Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej," abbreviated as SLD), with 8.2 percent of the vote for the Sejm. Neither held seats in the Senate. These parties were followed by a number of smaller parties. Between 2010 and 2015, Poland's directly elected president was also from the PO, Bronisław Komorowski.

The year 2015 brought a change to Poland's political landscape. First came the presidential elections in May 2015, which saw PiS's Andrzej Duda narrowly defeating PO's candidate Komorowski. The PiS and its partners in the "United Right" (in Polish, "Zjednoczona Prawica," abbreviated as ZP) coalition also won the parliamentary elections in October 2015. Under Beata Szydło, who became prime minister, PiS obtained 37.6 percent of the popular vote and an absolute majority of seats in the Sejm, and 40 percent for the Senate. The Civic Platform fell to 24.1 percent (Sejm) and 28.9 percent (Senate), and the PSL to 5.1 percent and 7.4 percent, respectively. The left-wing opposition was formed by an alliance of parties, the United Left (in Polish, "Zjednoczona Lewica," abbreviated as ZL), which included the SLD and the former Palikot Movement; it received 7.6 percent in the Sejm but no seats in the Senate. Finally, a far-right challenger emerged with the party Kukiz'15, which obtained 8.8 percent of the popular vote for the Sejm but no seats in the Senate, as well as the new liberal party "Modern" (in Polish, Nowoczesna), which obtained 7.6 percent of the Sejm vote, though no seats in the Senate. Again, several other smaller parties obtained lower vote shares.

Since the mid-2000s, Polish party politics have been essentially dominated by the competition between PO and PiS. Both emerged from the Solidarity movement. PO initially had an economically liberal and moderately conservative profile but increasingly moderated its economic stance and, at the same time, embraced cultural liberalism and pro-European positions. PiS, on the contrary, developed into a populist right-wing party, adopting an anti-elite discourse and emphasizing national sovereignty, traditional morality, and close relations to the Catholic Church (Stanley 2013). Smaller parties are mostly incorporated into the sociocultural cleavage represented by the two major parties (Salek and Sztajdel 2019). Therefore, in our analyses, we focus on PiS and allied parties of the United Right on the one hand and

the center-right Civic Platform and its allies (mainly PSL) on the other. We leave out the left-wing SLD, the United Left, Kukiz'15, and the smaller parties, given that they do not espouse fundamentally different views on the European refugee crisis (though perhaps adopting more radical rhetoric).

Our analyses focus on five parliamentary debates held between 2014 and 2016, dealing with the European refugee crisis on the one hand and the Ukraine crisis on the other (see appendix for an overview). First, on September 16, 2015, PO Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz convened an extraordinary session of the Sejm to inform and discuss the handling of the refugee crisis prior to the EU agreement on the relocation quotas. During this debate, speakers of different parties voiced their positions; in total, we included nine speeches from representatives of the major parties. The next two debates occurred on October 2, 2016 in the Sejm, and October 19, 2016 in the Senate, respectively. Both deal with a draft resolution presented by the parliament's European Union Affairs Committee on the EU Commission's reform proposal of the Dublin Regulation (COM (2016) 270) mentioned previously. In the EU, national parliaments can raise objections against draft legislative acts to the presidents of the Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council if they consider that act incompatible with the principle of subsidiarity. The draft resolution by the European Union Affairs Committee argued that the EU relocation mechanism breached the principle of subsidiarity and was approved with votes from the opposition ([European Parliament 2016](#)). Nevertheless, it triggered a debate about the different political party positions on the refugee issue. We included five speeches from the Senate and seven from the Sejm related to this issue.

As we have already mentioned, no parliamentary debate was dedicated exclusively to the Ukrainian displacement crisis during our period of analysis. However, the issue came up in the context of other debates from 2014, which we included in our analysis. First, on February 19, 2014, Prime Minister Donald Tusk informed the Sejm of the situation in Ukraine (right before the demission of Yanukovych and the Russian annexation of Crimea), during which he was also questioned on Poland's preparation for an eventual influx of Ukrainian refugees. We analyzed the prime minister's speech as well as that of the opposition leader. Second, the issue of Ukrainian refugees also briefly came up in a debate in the Sejm on May 7, 2014. This debate was dedicated to passing a law to implement directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and the Council to harmonize the conditions for granting refugee status and subsidiary protection in EU member states. Again, we included two speeches from this debate: that of the Head of the Office for Foreigners, outlining how Poland is preparing for an eventual influx of Ukrainian refugees, and that of a speaker from the opposition.

We complemented our analysis with two interviews with experts on Polish migration policy: a member of a think tank and a university researcher. We primarily asked about their views of Poland's different responses to the Syrian versus the Ukrainian refugee movement. The interviews validated our findings from the discourse analysis.

3. The positioning and framing of the PiS–United Right government coalition

3.1 Positioning: Rejecting the admission and relocation of Syrian refugees

The government formed by PiS and the United Right outright rejected admitting *any* number of refugees and asylum seekers from the Middle East and North Africa in Poland. As explained earlier, the issue presented itself not because a significant number of refugees were actually applying for asylum in Poland but because the EU proposed a redistribution of refugees among member states to relieve the burden of the most affected states like Italy and Greece. It is this EU proposal that the PiS and United Right vehemently rejected, arguing that it breaches the principle of subsidiarity by interfering with Poland’s national sovereignty. Poland joined ranks with the governments of Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia on this matter, as expressed in a joint statement by the interior ministers of the “Visegrád Group” (V4):

Our assessment of the EU’s experience in tackling the influx of illegal migrants it has witnessed in 2015 and 2016 leads us to a conclusion that solutions introducing mandatory relocation of migrants, whether based on an ad-hoc decisions [*sic*] or a permanent mechanism, cannot be considered as effective measures to address such influx. The EU has shown inability to implement such measures and their introduction has even led to unnecessary divisions among the Member States. Moreover, we are of the opinion that relocation of migrants who do not qualify for international protection constitutes an additional pull factor for irregular migration. For these reasons we must reject mandatory relocations of illegal migrants or a similar permanent mechanism becoming a part of the EU’s response to the migration crisis. ([Visegrád Group 2016](#))

Instead, the Polish government and its Central and Eastern European partners advocated a “flexible solidarity” policy within the EU—voluntary participation of member states in redistributing refugees, allowing them to opt out by providing financial assistance or technical expertise. In practice, this means that Poland would not receive any refugees.

However, the Polish government’s refusal to accept refugees did not apply equally to all refugees. In contrast to their position on the EU relocation mechanism, PiS expressed its openness to admitting refugees from neighboring Ukraine should an escalating conflict generate a wave of forced displacement, as effectively occurred at the beginning of 2022. This position is illustrated by the following quote from a PiS MP during a report on the parliamentary commission’s decision to declare the EU relocation mechanism as incompatible with the principle of subsidiarity:

Let me use a hypothetical example: if, as a result of this mechanism, Poland was obliged to accept applicants for international protection who had reached a Member State far away from Poland from a country neighboring that Member State, and shortly afterward, Poland would experience significant migratory pressure from citizens of a neighboring country, e.g., Ukraine, exceeding the capabilities of the Polish asylum system, then the asylum seekers from a country neighboring Poland will go to other, more distant Member States as a result of the operation of this automated, corrective allocation mechanism. Yet, admitting asylum seekers in a neighboring Member State of their country of origin is more advantageous, if only because of a better knowledge of the culture and context of the neighboring country, which facilitates the process of granting international protection, and in the longer term—also integration activities. (Izabela Kloc, PiS, October 20, 2016)

Additionally, it can be observed that the PiS government used the Ukraine crisis to justify its rejection of the EU relocation mechanism. On several occasions, it pointed to the already large number of Ukrainian migrants in Poland to argue that it is doing its fair share to help refugees. For example, this was an argument brought forward by Prime Minister Beata Szydło in a debate in the European Parliament about the rule of law and democracy in Poland: “You are talking about migration—this is a serious problem—and you know it perfectly well. Poland welcomed about a million refugees from Ukraine, people whom no one wanted to help, they are with us today and we help them, this also needs to be discussed” (Szydło 2016).

How can we explain why the PiS coalition firmly rejected admitting refugees from the Middle East and North Africa by refusing to participate in the EU relocation mechanism while being more open to accepting refugees from Ukraine? As explained previously, our primary focus is on the frames mobilized in the debate about admitting refugees from the Middle East and North Africa. As in the other chapters, we argue that PiS’s position has to do with how the party frames Poland’s national identity—in particular concerning the other EU member states and Russia—as well as how they frame the refugees. It is primarily influenced by a historical narrative of Poland as a victim of larger European powers (primarily Germany and Russia) and a definition of Poland as a culturally homogenous nation-state unable to assimilate refugees from other cultural backgrounds.

3.2 Who are “we”? A sovereign Christian nation that refuses to be bullied by larger powers

As we have seen, the debate about admitting refugees in Poland is primarily triggered by the EU proposal to relocate refugees from the most affected member states. The representatives of the PiS coalition vehemently deny that Poland has any obligation to participate in this relocation of refugees within the EU. This denial is primarily based on their understanding of Poland’s *international position* and its relation to the

other member states of the EU, which differs fundamentally from the point of view of the political opposition. In fact, the representatives of the PiS coalition describe Poland as a state whose national sovereignty is at risk within the EU. This reasoning is because, instead of being a community of states that enjoy equal status, they see the EU as being dominated by the interests of the large and powerful “Western” member states—primarily Germany—that are taking advantage of weaker nations like Poland. In the view of PiS chairman Jarosław Kaczyński, the discourse of “European solidarity” adopted by the EU to justify the distribution of refugees merely serves to cover up the strategic interests of the dominant countries:

Finally, there’s also the frequent argument: European Union is paying us, there are European funds. Now, Madam Speaker of the House, Honourable Chamber, paying us for what? For us ceding to the large, strongest European countries—because they and not us decide in Brussels—a very considerable part of the ability to decide on our matters. They gain a powerful regulative power over Poland as well, which has an economic and a huge political value. We don’t get this for free. One could even say they are buying it from us for a very low cost. [Ovation] Therefore, we don’t have reasons for remorse. We have, however, reasons to defend our sovereignty and to stand up to unheard-of statements of European politicians spearheaded by Mister Schulz. [Ovation] We have the right to defend ourselves from defaming action conducted today by Poland’s mortal enemies. (Jarosław Kaczyński, PiS, September 16, 2015)

This emphasis on protecting Poland’s national sovereignty derives from PiS’s reading of Polish history, which is central to the party’s stance in the refugee crisis. It has taught Poland the necessity to protect its national sovereignty against interference by its stronger neighbors. This experience goes back to the three partitions of Poland in the eighteenth century, between the Kingdom of Prussia and the Austrian and Russian Empires. It repeats itself in 1939 when Poland was invaded by the German army in its military campaign against Eastern Europe. After the war, Poland was “surrendered” to the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence following the Yalta Conference between the Allied powers. As the following speaker suggests, this history should make Poland wary of its Western neighbors and their intentions, then and now:

Additionally, the German state and its representatives want to teach us solidarity. They constantly tell us about solidarity. In that case, I would like to ask, where were these countries? Where was the West when Prime Minister Putin harassed us, the Republic of Poland? After all, you know the answer to this question. The West then signed Nord Stream II four days ago. Not to mention the kind of Western solidarity with us we know from history. Well, High Sejm, not to look far, [let me remind you] the September Campaign [of 1939], the Warsaw Uprising, Yalta. We remember all of this, High Sejm. And the fact that the West wants to teach us solidarity now is peak insolence. (Patrik Jaki, Sejm, United Poland, September 16, 2015)

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Poland quickly oriented toward the West and joined the EU. This was interpreted as a “return to Europe” and a way to regain national sovereignty from Russian influence (Romaniszyn & Nowak 2003; Risse 2010: 76–81; Lewicki & Mandes 2015). However, according to the PiS coalition’s interpretation, the EU is increasingly turning out to have imperialist inclinations as well. Dominated by big powers like Germany, it seeks to take advantage of weaker member states like Poland and tries to bully them into submission. The pressure put on Poland by the EU and particularly by Germany to accept refugees is seen as an example of this. We see later how this interpretation clashes with that of the Civic Platform, which precisely emphasizes Poland’s moral indebtedness to (Western) Europe, given that these countries have supported Poland’s integration into the EU.⁹

In justifying their rejection of refugees from the Middle East, the representatives of the United Right coalition also mobilize a *cultural frame* to define Poland as a homogenous, Christian (particularly Catholic) nation. In doing so, they emphasize the historical role of the Catholic Church in the formation of the Polish nation described in the previous section. This identity marker is most clearly articulated by the following Senator:

The Polish nation—regardless of whether someone likes it or not—is evidently a nation very strongly associated with Christianity, with Catholicism. And we, as Poles, will emphasize it, not because someone likes it or not, but because it results from our internal sensitivity, which is precisely this sovereign co-player in the European Union. Yes, helping Catholics and Christians in that area is our natural challenge. (Jan Żaryn, PiS, October 19, 2016)

From this perspective, immigrants with a Muslim background from the Middle East are not only seen as incompatible with Poland’s cultural and religious heritage—they pose a serious threat to it. For example, the following quote by PiS chairman Jarosław Kaczyński vividly describes how Muslim immigrants would impress their culture on Poland and desecrate its places of worship, just as they have allegedly done in other European nations:

⁹ Next to denying that Poland is indebted to Western Europe, there is a second reason why representatives of the PiS coalition deny that Poland has any obligation to participate in the relocation of refugees. They argue that, unlike most Western European countries, Poland has no history of colonialism and foreign military intervention particularly in the Middle East, which they identify as the root causes of the current refugee movements toward Europe. This history may generate a moral obligation for Western countries to help refugees, but it does not apply to Poland, as suggested by Kaczyński in the following quote: “We’ve heard here also other arguments, moral or moral-historical ones. The first is colonialism. Poland did not participate in that whatsoever. The second argument is Middle East policy of some European countries and United States in recent years. It was all connected with revolutions, and ensuing destabilization. Poland did not participate in that as well” (Jarosław Kaczyński, PiS, Sejm, September 16, 2015). Thus, instead of forcing innocent states like Poland to participate in the solution of a crisis they have not caused, the large Western powers of the EU should take responsibility themselves. As another PiS Senator puts it, Poland, along with other Central and Eastern European countries, has different historical experiences than the other member states of the EU. Therefore, they have developed different “sensitivities” toward admitting refugees that should be respected (Jan Żaryn, PiS, Senate, October 19, 2016).

What is happening in Italy? Churches occupied, sometimes used as toilettes. What is happening in France? Incessant row, sharia law implemented as well, patrols enforcing sharia law. The same in London, also in Germany the strongest, the toughest on this point these kinds of occurrences take place. Do you want this to appear in Poland so that we'll cease to be hosts in our own country? Do you want that? (Jarosław Kaczyński, PiS, September 16, 2015)

Some representatives of the right-wing party coalition even interpret Poland as a defender of Europe's Christian heritage against Islam. They draw on the historical account of Poland as Europe's "antemurale christianitatis" (i.e., the bulwark of Christianity). This account has its roots in the late seventeenth century, following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire by the Holy League (formed by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Habsburg Empire, and the Russian Empire). The Polish King Jan Sobieski played a leading role in this defeat when his army liberated a besieged Vienna and thereby stopped the further advance of the Ottomans toward Europe. This history is recalled by the following MP: "Coming to conclusions, Madam Speaker, I would like to say only one thing: Poland, the Republic of Poland, has a very large share in preserving the Christian roots of this country [*sic*—probably "continent"], and when Jan III Sobieski will see your naiveté, he will turn in his grave" (Patrik Jaki, United Poland, September 16, 2015).

This framing suggests that Poland should now play a similar role in stopping the expansion of Islam in Europe, in particular by opposing the failed "multiculturalist" policies enacted in other countries that now threaten Europe's Christian heritage:

The compulsory admittance of refugees creates the impression that Europe can cope with any influx of refugees and migrants impersonating refugees. Thanks to such a policy, we will have more and more migrants in the European Union. If Europe wants to survive, it should rebuild its Christian character. Multikulti is threatening the possibility of returning to Christian roots in Europe. (Konrad Głębocki, PiS, October 20, 2016)

However, this cultural definition of Poland as a Christian nation also contains a *moral* self-definition. Central to Christian ethics is the principle of charity, expressed in the saying "love thy neighbor," meaning aid people in need. Drawing on this principle, the Catholic Church, in the person of Pope Francis, is a vocal advocate of helping refugees, a position officially shared by the Polish Church (Narkowicz 2018; Krotofil & Motak 2018). The Pope's stance presents a dilemma for Law and Justice, which presents itself as a defender of Christian values. Kaczyński, however, turns the argument of Christian charity around. According to him, this principle obliges Poles to help their own families and their nation first because help cannot be extended to all foreigners: "There is such a principle and it's *ordo caritatis*, the order of loving. Based on that principle, the loved ones go first, family, then the nation, then others" (Jarosław Kaczyński, PiS, Sejm, September 16, 2015). Thus, instead of admitting

refugees to Europe, Poland should extend financial help to support refugee camps in the countries of origin.

Finally, PiS representatives occasionally also draw on an *economic* frame to justify the rejection of refugees, suggesting that they are a burden to the national economy. For example, the following Senator describes Poland as a “developing” country:

Ladies and gentlemen, why do such rich countries as Saudi Arabia and the Arab Emirates not support them? After all, they have a lot of money; they can support these centers. We, Poles, have no obligations towards them. It was Europe who brought them here after the war for demographic reasons, in need of a cheap labor force. Now, Europe itself sees that this Multikulti policy has gone bankrupt. And what now? Are we supposed to deal with the problems that we didn't cause? We are a developing country, we are a culturally homogeneous country, and we cannot bring culturally alien nations here. (Waldemar Bonkowski, PiS, October 19, 2019)

We show that this contrasts with PO's view of Poland's level of socioeconomic development, according to which Poland, as an EU member state, is among the most developed countries in the world.

Compared to their statements in the context of the European refugee crisis, however, the PiS coalition's understanding of the “we” leads to different conclusions when it comes to admitting Ukrainian refugees. First, PiS's judgment of Poland's *international* relations leads it to adopt a welcoming position toward Ukrainians. Recall that PiS interprets Poland as a victim of larger powers that seek to undermine Poland's national sovereignty. While this interpretation leads to opposing the admission of Syrian refugees via the EU relocation mechanism, it creates a strong commitment to Ukraine, a country whose sovereignty is being threatened by a common enemy, namely Russia: “[T]he starting point is various sensitivities causing that for us, this side of Europe and what is happening beyond the eastern border of Poland are not only clearer but also clearly worth supporting” (Jan Żaryn, October 19, 2016).

This historical “sensitivity” Poland feels for what is occurring in Ukraine goes back to their common fate under the dominance of the Soviet Union. By virtue of its own history of being suppressed by the Soviet Union, Poland should stand with Ukraine in its fight against Russia and be prepared, among other things, to receive Ukrainians seeking shelter in Poland.

Second, even though Polish–Ukrainian relations were not always free of conflict (including a war over East Galicia after World War I), Poland is interpreted as *culturally* close to Ukraine due to its common history, which goes back to the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, its geographic contiguity, and the many personal ties that have emerged across the border of both countries through migration. Consequently, Poland should be open to admitting migrants and refugees from Ukraine:

At the same time, we must remember what is happening in the East. It is possible that there may be a situation where millions of actual refugees from Ukraine,

refugees who are culturally closer to us, will rapidly come flooding in here. I believe that we cannot open ourselves to culturally alien nations. (Waldemar Bonkowski, PiS, October 19, 2016)

These self-understandings, taken together, lead to a more open position toward receiving Ukrainian rather than Middle Eastern and North African refugees.

3.3 Who are “they”? Cultural aliens, fake refugees, and potential terrorists

The Law and Justice coalition uses a variety of frames to suggest that refugees from the Middle East and North Africa should not be admitted to Poland. First, they mobilize a *legal frame* by repeatedly questioning whether the persons migrating from the Middle East and North Africa to the EU are bona fide “refugees” fleeing war and persecution or rather “economic migrants” looking for better opportunities. In fact, most speakers prefer to use the terms “migrants” or “emigrants” instead of refugees. Categorizing them as “mere” migrants implies that destination countries do not have the legal obligation to admit them and can rightfully turn them back, given that their lives are not at risk. This distinction is suggested in the following quote: “The regulation [i.e., the EU relocation mechanism] refers to those seeking international protection, but today, we are dealing with abuse of the asylum system, with economic migrants impersonating refugees” (Konrad Głębocki, PiS, October 10, 2016). To substantiate this claim, one Senator compares Middle Eastern and North African refugees to the Jewish refugees during World War II to underline that their lives are not threatened in the same way:

We live in a country that has a certain oversensitivity to the ignominious history and behavior of many at a time when many more lives could be saved. During World War II, for example, ships with Jews were turned back, and it was, in fact, condemning these people to death. And we have a certain fear that because of our “no,” we will be pusillanimous, we will be guilty of similar behaviors. But are we really trying to sentence people to death somewhere, even unconsciously? I have the impression that these are not refugees who come from places where there is an absolute threat to life and that if they were allowed to assimilate in the centers in which they are staying [i.e., in neighboring host countries], which is sometimes even a certain chance for these people and these societies, then it would be a lot cheaper. (Jarosław Obremski, PiS, October 19, 2016)

Second, the refugees are frequently othered in *cultural* and religious terms as “Muslims.” In a quote already cited, for example, PiS chairman Jarosław Kaczyński warns that the refugees would introduce “sharia law” in Europe (Jarosław Kaczyński, Sejm, September 16, 2015). By characterizing refugees as “Muslims,” it is implied that they cannot be assimilated in Christian Poland:

In other countries, they do not want to assimilate. They are aggressive, for example, in Sweden. We cannot forget about it. On the other hand, the left and mainstream media show off their morals, whereas they are known for mocking the Polish Church. I have an offer for you: you will see now what will happen if you try to mock Allah and the Koran. Only then will you see how our cultures really differ. This will be a crash course in morality for you. (Patrik Jaki, United Poland, September 16, 2015)

Some speakers actually single out Christians among the refugees and argue that Poland should only help them: “Yes, helping Catholics and Christians in that area is our natural challenge” (Jan Żaryn, PiS, October 19, 2016).

Third, refugees are framed in *security* terms as potential “criminals” and “terrorists” from the Islamic State. As such, they pose a security threat to Poles and should, therefore, not be admitted:

The United States, in its last position, clearly indicates that among the refugees, there will also be representatives of the Islamic State. Six days ago, a German department indicated that representatives of the Islamic State would almost certainly be recruited from among these refugees. Prime Minister, let me tell you more: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he would not accept any refugees. The most interesting part is how he justified it. Well, he said he would not accept them because his security services would not be able to separate those in need from terrorists. (Patrik Jaki, United Poland, September 16, 2015)

Moreover, PiS coalition members even suggest that “political correctness” precludes politicians in other EU member states from clearly pointing out the threat caused by the influx of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa: “Political correctness in the European Union precludes linking the terrorist threat with the influx of migrants, yet such a link is a fact” (Konrad Głębocki, PiS, October 10, 2016).

Finally—even though of minor relevance—is an *economic* characterization of refugees as lazy or less hardworking than Poles, suggesting that they will be a burden on the national economy and social services: “We cannot forget about the experiences of other countries. France, Great Britain, Sweden, and Switzerland recently released data: 90 percent of the so-called emigrants do not want to work, they do not want to accept any job, despite the fact that they get the job” (Patrik Jaki, United Poland, September 16, 2015).

According to Kaczyński, the refugees coming to Europe compare unfavorably to the Poles who emigrated to other countries in past decades. Rather than being a burden, these emigrants have contributed to economic growth and even brought freedom rather than terror to their host countries:

There is, Honourable Chamber, also an argument raised frequently, for example, by Juncker. It’s an argument on Poles’ emigration. Indeed, many, many Poles

emigrated—both in recent and distant years, last century and the following century. It's true. But, Honourable Chamber, did Poles, while emigrating, impose their own rules in the places they had appeared? Did they terrorize anybody? No, they worked hard, with great humility, often too great anyway. [Ovation] And although there were some, especially in the 19th century, who fought “for your freedom and ours,” their fight, to be honest, obliges others to us as a country of freedom, not the other way around. (Jarosław Kaczyński, PiS, September 16, 2015)

Instead of being indebted to other nations for receiving Polish migrants in the past, Kaczyński suggests that other nations should rather be grateful to Poles for their contributions. In particular, he recalls the participation of Polish exiles from partitioned Poland in national independence movements of other countries in the nineteenth century, which fought under the motto “for your freedom and ours.”

The framing of the refugees changes when it comes to Ukrainians. First, there are no security-related framings of Ukrainian migrants and refugees. Second, Ukrainians are considered “real” refugees in contrast to the Middle Eastern and North African refugees, who are assumed to be mostly economic migrants. Despite the fact that up to 2022, Poland has admitted Ukrainians mostly as labor migrants, several politicians from PiS argue that they are akin to refugees, and because Poland has admitted them balances its reluctance to admit refugees from the Middle East and North Africa. Consider the following comment made by a PiS Senator, interrupted by an interjection from the audience:

If we persistently repeat that over the years, we have admitted nearly 900,000 Ukrainians to Poland, it is not only to say ... [Voice from the chamber: To work.] Yes, to work. This is what I want to say. We are talking about it not only to compare it with the action of Ms. Angela Merkel, because she also wanted to accept 1 million de facto refugees in order to strengthen the German economy, but also because the starting point is various sensitivities causing that for us this side of Europe and what is happening beyond the eastern border of Poland are not only clearer but also clearly worth supporting. (Jan Żaryn, PiS, October 19, 2016)

As we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, a similar statement is made by PiS Prime Minister Beata Szydło in the European Parliament to justify why Poland does not participate in the EU relocation mechanism.

Finally, in contrast to the refugees from the Middle East and North Africa, Ukrainians are defined as *culturally* close, as well as having established personal ties to Poles, and therefore capable of being integrated more easily in Poland:

At the same time, we must remember what is happening in the East. It is possible that there may be a situation where millions of actual refugees from Ukraine, refugees who are culturally closer to us, will rapidly come flooding in here. I believe that we cannot open ourselves to culturally alien nations. (Waldemar Bonkowski, PiS, October 19, 2016)

These understandings of Ukrainian refugees, taken together, generate a more open disposition, effectively put into practice when around a million refugees were admitted to Poland after the Russian invasion in early 2022.

4. The positioning and framing of the opposition party Civic Platform

4.1 Positioning: Participating in the EU relocation mechanism

In sharp contrast to PiS and its coalition partners, the Civic Platform is more open to admitting refugees from the Middle East and North Africa to Poland. Under Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz, the PO government agreed to the proposed EU quota plan adopted by the Council in September 2015. This plan would have resulted in the emergency relocation of around 7000 Syrian refugees to Poland. The government's stance is summarized by Ewa Kopacz in a televised speech broadcast before the Council decision: "I assure you that our hospitality will be offered to real refugees, to those who had to flee their homes, often saving only their closest ones from the turmoil of war. Poland wants to help" (Kopacz 2015).

However, it must be noted that the government agreed with the plan only under a variety of conditions, such as distinguishing between "real refugees" and "economic migrants" and implementing security checks of resettled refugees:

I want to assure you that in the ongoing negotiations we are setting out tangible conditions: separating refugees from economic migrants, sealing the European Union's external borders and full control of our services over the people we are going to take in. Poland is and will be safe, Poland is and will be pro-European, Poland is and will be tolerant. (Kopacz 2015)

Throughout the parliamentary debates, PO Deputies and Senators expressed their support for admitting at least some refugees in Poland and not boycotting a common European solution to the refugee crisis. However, it should be noted that the Civic Platform aligned with the other parties in their opposition to the "corrective allocation mechanism" proposed by the EU Commission in May 2016. This issue was debated in the Polish parliament in October 2016, and PO representatives supported the notion that this mechanism breaches the principle of subsidiarity in the EU:

The Civic Platform will vote in favor of this draft resolution, thus expressing its opposition to the idea of automatism in imposing the number of refugees that individual countries should accept, as well as to the absurdly high penalty amount in the event that a given country fails to comply with this obligation. Indeed, one can agree that these two ideas of the European Commission are inconsistent with the

principle of subsidiarity, which has been guarded by national parliaments since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty. (Tomasz Głogowski, PO, October 20, 2016)

The MP is quick to add, however, that the PO is willing to participate in a European solution to the refugee crisis and accept a share of refugees in Poland:

However, I would like to emphasize very clearly: the fact that Civic Platform was and is against the automatism in imposing the number of refugees on the states does not mean that we agree to a policy of fear and burying our heads in the sand. After all, migration policy, in accordance with the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty, is the domain of the European Union, within which we would like to be an important player and not a malcontent who voluntarily places himself on its outskirts, as unfortunately is the case in recent months. (Tomasz Głogowski, PO, October 20, 2016)

As regards admitting Ukrainian migrants, PO does not differ substantially from the position of Law and Justice. Likewise, it favors admitting migrants and refugees from Ukraine to Poland. The only difference is that, in contrast to the PiS coalition, PO representatives did not refer to the admission of Ukrainian migrants as an excuse not to participate in the EU relocation mechanism. Rather, they referred to the Ukraine crisis as an argument in favor of participating in the EU relocation mechanism because Poland might have to rely on the EU's solidarity:

We Poles may find ourselves in a difficult spot at any time due to the dynamic situation in Eastern Europe and Eastern Ukraine. We will expect help and solidarity with Poland when we need it. I want to assure you that, just as in life, in politics, solidarity should work both ways. Today, it is Europe and our partners in Europe that expect this solidarity from us. (Ewa Kopacz, PO, September 16, 2015)

To make sense of these policy positions, we have to examine the Civic Platform's understanding of Polish national identity and who the refugees are, which is fundamentally different from that of PiS. Again, we primarily focus on the debate on admitting Middle Eastern and North African refugees and consider the discourse on Ukrainian refugees only as a contrast case.

4.2 Who are “we”? A nation indebted to Europe and with a forgotten multicultural history

The main driver of the Civic Platform's support for the relocation of refugees to Poland during the European refugee crisis is the *international* frame, that is, the importance they attribute to Poland's membership in the EU. The representatives of the PO do not share PiS's view that the EU is dominated by the interests of great powers like Germany and that Poland should be watchful of its national sovereignty.

They have a fundamentally different view of what the EU is and how Poland should situate itself within it. In their view, the EU is a community of solidarity whose members help each other out when they are in need. As Poland is part of this community, it has an obligation to extend its help to the other member states. Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz puts it as follows:

Today, we are aware that we are in the European Union, that we are in this great European community, but belonging to this community is [also] an obligation. Today, turning our backs on those who need help in this great European family results in us morally and mentally leaving this community. Today we are not in Germany, where there are 800,000 refugees, we are not in Italy, nor in Greece, nor Hungary, where hundreds of thousands of immigrants actually are located. (Ewa Kopacz, PO, September 16, 2015)

Poland's participation in the relocation of refugees is not only interpreted as a requirement of European solidarity. In the view of the Civic Platform, it is also a way to repay Poland's debt to the EU for receiving European solidarity when it needed it. The following MP mentions that Poland is the largest beneficiary of the EU cohesion policy:

The essence of the European Union, thanks to which Europe has been able to think about development and economic growth for decades and slowly forget about past wars between its members, is that better-off countries help those in need. We all know how many areas in Poland benefited from this aid; only the blind would not notice it. At the moment, for example, Greece needs help. How can we expect financial solidarity and no cuts to resources for cohesion funds if we do not try to show our willingness for solidarity with the countries that need this help in solving the refugee problem? (Tomasz Głogowski, PO, October 20, 2016)

Next to this understanding of the EU as a community of solidarity to which Poland is indebted, the Civic Platform also emphasizes that Poland—after all, the EU's sixth largest member state—should not gamble away its credibility in the EU by fundamentally opposing the relocation of refugees. This view is expressed in the following Senator's criticisms of the PiS government: "After all, migration policy, in accordance with the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty, is the domain of the European Union, within which we would like to be an important player and not a malcontent who voluntarily places himself on its outskirts, as unfortunately is the case in recent months" (Tomasz Głogowski, PO, October 20, 2016).

Underlying this statement is the conviction that Poland's place is in the EU and that it should stand firm with its European partners. It can be hypothesized that this is based on a different reading of Poland's history than the one offered by PiS. Instead of remembering how Poland has been duped by Western powers throughout its history, the Civic Platform remembers Poland's isolation from Western Europe through the "Iron Curtain" and emphasizes that Poland's place is at the heart of Europe, as

suggested by the slogan, “return to Europe,” of the EU accession campaign. Consequently, Poland should not marginalize itself again and instead participate in a common European solution to the refugee crisis.

The representatives of the Civic Platform also differ from Law and Justice in their *cultural self-understanding* of Poland. Instead of defining Poland as a culturally homogenous Christian nation, they refer to Poland’s past multicultural and multireligious traditions. Some representatives mention the minority of Polish Tatars living in Poland or that Poland received several thousand Chechen refugees in the 1990s. Other speakers go further back in history to the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth under the Jagiellonian dynasty, which covered large parts of Central and Eastern Europe during the seventeenth century and accommodated a multiethnic and religious population. This understanding is illustrated in the following quote from MP Rafał Grupański:

I would like to remind you that today’s numerous xenophobic and nationalist statements averse to the so-called aliens ironically remind us of the ideas that once guided Gomułka and Moczar.¹⁰ They wanted a Piast Poland, truncated and cut off from any Jagiellonian tradition, with one [homogenous] communist nation. I would like to point out that our task is to recall the best and most illustrious traditions of the Commonwealth of Poland from the period of the multi-cultural and multi-religious Commonwealth. Poland, in the time of religious wars in Europe, because of receiving the holy communion of both kinds among others, one-third of citizens took the holy communion this way. Because this is how the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth was built. Polish tolerance cannot suddenly become only a footnote to history; it cannot become an asterisk reminding us that there once was some Warsaw confederation.¹¹ But we won’t accept any aliens today. It is enough that they have a different creed, it is enough that they come from a different culture to not admit them to Poland. Various peoples lived in the ancient Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, a country with an area of nearly 1,000,000 square kilometers. (Rafał Grupański, PO, September 16, 2015)

In this statement, the speaker opposes a “Piast” and a “Jagiellonian” Poland, referring to different episodes of Polish history. The “Piast” dynasty ruled Poland during the Middle Ages; its first ruler converted to Christianity. In contrast to the Jagiellonian dynasty, which ruled over the vast expansion of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, Piast Poland stands for the historical Polish “heartland,” a point of reference of the Polish right.

Furthermore, in contrast to PiS, the Civic Platform also emphasizes Poland’s special *moral* obligation to help refugees who are in need. This moral self-understanding is based on two different aspects of Poland’s national identity. First, Poland is defined

¹⁰ Polish communist leaders responsible for an anti-Semitic campaign of 1968.

¹¹ A sixteenth-century act granting the aristocracy the freedom of religion.

as a country of emigration and exile. Many Poles know what it means to be an emigrant or a refugee—in particular, those dissidents who had to flee the communist regime—and they have a debt of gratitude to repay. As the following speaker suggests, this goes back a long time in history:

I am from the “Solidarity” generation that used the refugee mandate. Unexpectedly, thousands of people overnight had to stay in the West and had to be admitted there, in that territory, with virtually no checking. But let us also mention the much more tragic Polish emigration—the one to which Mickiewicz devoted his book.¹² And about the migration that took place in the lands where Christianity did not take root—in Iran or India—thousands of Polish children were admitted, starving, with lice, without parents. (Jan Rulewski, PO, October 19, 2016)

Note how this interpretation of Polish emigration differs fundamentally from that offered by PiS’s Jarosław Kaczyński, quoted earlier. While this speaker emphasizes Poland’s debt of gratitude to other countries for having received Polish emigrants, Kaczyński suggests instead that other countries have a debt of gratitude toward Poland for the participation of Polish emigrants in their respective struggles for independence and national emancipation in the nineteenth century. This contradiction shows the extent to which the same historical events are interpreted in fundamentally different ways in the Polish discourse.

Second, PO representatives also mobilize Christian values, to which Poland as a self-defined Christian nation is supposed to be committed, to justify admitting refugees, as exemplified by the following quote:

Honourable Senator! The sensitivity, ethics, and morality of all of us here in Europe are the same—Christian. It is Christian because we have been taught it this way. And whether we want it or not ... [Senator Zientarski: Yes, sir. Bravo!] [Applause] We have to take it with whatever comes with the territory, with its teachings, with signs, with the one hanging here [points to the Catholic cross]. And this lesson comes from the fact that Christ was also a refugee. And others welcomed him in the inn, unprepared ... There was no place for him ... [Senator Kogut: But they also kicked him out.] So, when we say that Europe should be Christian, let’s act to make it Christian. Thank you very much. (Jan Rulewski, PO, October 19, 2016)

Note, again, how the interpretation of Poland as a Christian nation leads to an entirely different conclusion than that offered by PiS. While PiS offers a communitarian–national reading of Christian principles, suggesting that they teach Poles to take care of their families and compatriots first, PO offers a cosmopolitan reading, suggesting that Christians must show charity irrespective of where those in need come from.

Finally, to underscore that Poland is ready to receive refugees, PO members also mobilize an *economic* frame and emphasize Poland’s level of economic development.

¹² Adam Mickiewicz, a Polish national poet, along with other opposition figures, emigrated from Poland after the failed “November Uprising” (1830–31) against the Russian occupation.

In contrast to the politicians of the PiS coalition, who point out Poland's relative economic disadvantage vis-à-vis Western Europe, the Civic Platform instead emphasizes Poland's relative economic *advantage* and stability as a member of the EU vis-à-vis other regions of the world like the Middle East. According to PO Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz, Poland is now placed in one of the world's wealthier and more stable regions: "Bear in mind that today, we are on the better side of the world, in a place where people want to come, not from where they flee. Europe—we—will be that credible place they can sail to and take refuge in" (Ewa Kopacz, PO, September 16, 2015).

The same perception is reflected in the statement of a PO Senator:

It is a great splendor and happiness for us to live in a place on earth that is considered—universally, not only in poor countries—the best to live, the best to live in the world. This is how Europe is perceived. Not the United States, not other places, but Europe, the European Union. Of course, life in different countries in the European Union is different, but in general ... Hence, it is no wonder contemporary pariahs, most often disinherited by the changing climate, deprived of any livelihood, except for the information that there is such a place in the world, are drawn to us from all sides. (Mieczysław Augustyn, PO, October 19, 2016)

These statements reflect a certain pride that—after becoming a member of the EU—Poland is now part of the club of rich nations in the world. Consequently, it should be magnanimous enough to receive refugees.

When it comes to the Ukrainian crisis, the PO's understanding of Polish national identity generates an open position as well. As with PiS, the main driver is an *international* frame, according to which Poland has a particular obligation to stand by Ukraine as a fellow victim of Russian aggression. In particular, PO representatives emphasize Poland's history of foreign occupation by the Soviet Union and the exile of Poles during the communist regime to mobilize solidarity with Ukrainians. In the following segment, for example, Donald Tusk suggests that Poles must show solidarity with Ukrainians because of their own historical experiences:

We Poles will certainly not be indifferent to these events. I am talking about both our emotions, which are also based on historical experience, our own experience—often personal experience with violence—but we will also not remain indifferent because we are aware that the development of events in Ukraine will also determine history, the future of the whole region. It will directly influence the future of Poland, the security of Poland and Poles, both for geographical, political, and historical reasons. (Donald Tusk, PO, February 19, 2014)

In contrast to PiS, PO representatives do not refer to cultural frames to support admitting Ukrainians to Poland. Nevertheless, they come to similar policy conclusions.

4.3 Who are “they”? “Real” refugees in need of protection but that must be distinguished from economic migrants

First and foremost, representatives of the Civic Platform see most people arriving in the EU from the Middle East and North Africa from a *moral* perspective as people in humanitarian need who deserve help. In contrast to PiS, they highlight the fact that these are people who have been fleeing war and conflict: “Can we afford a gesture of solidarity today toward those who really flee their country just because they are afraid of losing their health or life? Is a nation of 40 million able to show solidarity toward those who need this help?” (Ewa Kopacz, PO, September 16, 2015).

In particular, as we have seen above, PO representatives implicitly compare the refugees seeking admission in the EU to Polish dissidents and exiles seeking refuge in the “West” after the communist regime’s crackdown against the Solidarity movement from 1981 to 1983 (Jan Rulewski, PO, Senate, October 19, 2016). This comparison suggests that Poles have a particular moral obligation to extend a helping hand.

Second, however, this moral framing of refugees bleeds into a more restrictive *legal* frame. PO representatives point out that one must be careful to distinguish between “real” refugees and “economic migrants,” suggesting that only the former have a right to receive entry to Poland according to the legal framework: “Of course, both the principle of voluntary [admittance] and the principle of proper elaboration of the method of separation, distinguishing economic immigrants from real refugees, are important here. But the most important is this humanitarian problem” (Rafał Grupański, PO, September 16, 2015).

Third, even though they distinguish between refugees and economic migrants, PO representatives also portray refugees in *economic* terms as potential human capital. They argue that refugees should be admitted because they can contribute to Poland’s economy:

This national dimension also includes the needs of the Polish labor market. Due to the aging of the population in Poland, only for this reason, about 2.5 million people will vanish in the next two decades. We need a policy towards migration, but one that will allow these people to be assimilated, which will allow them to build their new family nest in Poland, and at the same time will bring us both employees and income. (Mieczysław Augustyn, PO, October 19, 2016)

Fourth, PO members reject labeling all Middle Eastern and North African refugees in *security* terms as terrorists or criminals, as the PiS does. Instead, the security frame is turned around. The refugees are the ones fleeing terrorism and war:

Bear in mind that political refugees, for example, from the territory of Syria, are refugees who flee an aggressive form of Islam, flee the Islamic State. Building, creating an atmosphere around it [suggesting] that Polish newborns will be blown up by terrorists who will come to Poland as refugees, is completely irresponsible. (Rafał Grupański, PO, September 16, 2015)

Again, however, representatives of the PO do remark that it is important to separate refugees with a criminal or terrorist background and deny them entry into the country:

The duty of every government is, above all, to ensure the safety of citizens who live in our country and to ensure the safety of our compatriots. [Applause] And if so, our next precondition is, among other things, that we will verify those who come to us, they will be verified by our security services. (Ewa Kopacz, PO, September 16, 2015)

Finally, the PO representatives avoid using a *cultural* frame to label refugees in cultural, religious, or ethnic terms. Instead, they call out the right-wing parties for doing so:

So I do not want to focus on the statistics, on what, for example, Minister Piotrowska has just presented, but on the current social atmosphere and what is the situation in connection with this problem at the moment because we are facing so many concerns, reluctance, xenophobic and nationalist statements that as the political class we should strongly, emphatically say: we do not agree to this kind of language in the refugee debate. (Rafał Grupański, PO, September 16, 2015)

They explicitly reject distinguishing between refugees on religious terms, as some right-wing politicians have proposed: “Dividing the aid into what we should give to Christian refugees and what we should not give to Muslim refugees, dividing aid into that for Christian children and that for Muslim children is also unacceptable considering the responsibility for how we, as the political class, build social attitudes” (Rafał Grupański, PO, September 16, 2015).

As regards Ukrainians, PO members take a more nuanced view than PiS prior to the events of 2022. Without denying the need to help Ukrainian refugees, they point out that the Ukrainians residing in Poland are mostly labor migrants: “And we, [while] pretending to admit refugees, are actually hiring Ukrainians” (Jan Rulewski, PO, October 19, 2016). With this observation, they criticize the PiS communication strategy of pointing to the large number of Ukrainian migrants living in Poland as the reason for refusing to participate in the EU relocation mechanism. As we have seen, the Civic Platform argues quite the opposite, namely that Poland must rely on European solidarity should “real” Ukrainian refugees displaced by the conflict arrive in large numbers.

5. Summary and accounting for differences between political parties

This chapter has shown to what extent the respective positions of PiS and PO on admitting refugees from the Middle East and North Africa as part of the EU relocation mechanism are based on diametrically opposed understandings of Polish national identity, its history, and its relationship to Europe. Table 6.1 summarizes the

Table 6.1 Positionings and framings in the debate on the admission of refugees in Poland

	PiS–United Right		Civic Platform	
Policy position	Rejecting refugees and refusing to participate in EU relocation mechanism		Admitting “real” refugees and participating in the EU relocation mechanism	
Framing	Who are “we”?	Who are “they”?	Who are “we”?	Who are “they”?
International	Poland is a victim of larger powers, in particular Germany	—	Poland is part of the EU community of solidarity	—
Cultural	Poland is a Christian Catholic nation with a homogenous culture	Refugees are Muslims that cannot be assimilated	Poland has a multicultural and multireligious history	—
Moral	Poland is a Christian community that should take care of its own members first	—	Poland is a Christian community with a duty of brotherhood to people who suffer, and a country of emigration and exile with a debt of gratitude	Most refugees are people in need who flee conflicts; refugees can be compared to Polish exiles
Economic	Poland is a developing country; it belongs to the poorer part of Europe	Refugees are lazy and do not work	Poland belongs to one of the richest regions of the world	Refugees can become human capital
Legal	—	Most refugees are not “real” refugees, but economic migrants, who have no claim to asylum	—	“Real” refugees with a right to seek asylum should be distinguished from “economic migrants”
Security	—	Most refugees are criminals and terrorists	—	Most refugees flee terrorism; the terrorists among them should be excluded

frames they mobilized during the debate. In contrast, admitting Ukrainian refugees has not caused major disagreements, and the frames of the two parties almost converge. Thus, it can be argued that the conflict in Ukraine and ensuing displacement have not fed into the cleavage structure of Polish politics. Consequently, this chapter focuses only on the frames mobilized in the debate about admitting refugees from the Middle East and Northern Africa.

The Law and Justice Party offers a nationalist interpretation of who “we, the Poles,” are. In cultural terms, they define Poland as a homogenous Christian Catholic nation; in moral terms, a community committed to prioritizing the well-being of its members ahead of strangers; in economic terms, one of the poorer countries of the EU; and in international terms, a nation that has fallen victim to larger powers throughout its history and thus has to protect its national sovereignty against foreign interference. In contrast, the Civic Platform’s interpretation of Poland is cosmopolitan. In cultural terms, they define Poland as a nation with a multicultural and multireligious history; in moral terms, they emphasize Poles’ commitment to the value of Christian charity and its indebtedness to the “West” as a country of emigration and exile; in international terms, they situate Poland within a European community of solidarity; and in economic terms, they locate Poland on the side of the most developed countries of the world that can easily carry the burden of receiving refugees.

These diverging interpretations of Poland’s national identity are also reflected in the respective parties’ interpretations of who “they, the refugees” are. Besides denying that they are bona fide refugees, Law and Justice views them as culturally unassimilable Muslims, a potential security threat, and an economic burden. Consequently, they reject admitting any refugees to Poland. In contrast, the Civic Platform takes a more nuanced position, arguing that Poland should take in at least some refugees. They emphasize that most of them are bona fide refugees whose lives are threatened by war and terror and who could even contribute to Poland’s economy while not denying that there might be economic migrants and even terrorists among the refugees that must be excluded. Additionally, they eschew labeling the refugees in cultural terms as “Muslims.” How can we make sense of these party differences in terms of the theory of cleavage structures?

Among our country cases, Poland most closely approximates the theory of an emerging new cleavage between “cosmopolitans” and “communitarians” forming around questions of migration and national sovereignty (see e.g., [de Wilde et al. 2019](#)). As we have seen, this divide pits those who support more open borders and supranational governance against those who advocate closed borders and national sovereignty. In Poland, the issue of migration and refugees only gained salience during the 2015 elections. It became embedded in and reinforced a deep sociocultural divide in Polish politics that began to develop in the mid-2000s, mainly evolving around questions of national identity, morality, and support for the EU ([Lewicki & Mandes 2015](#); [Sałek & Sztajdel 2019](#); [de Wilde 2019](#)).

Following the transition to democracy in the 1990s, Polish party politics were characterized by a high degree of electoral volatility and an unstable party system. Nevertheless, two main camps emerged: a post-communist left and an array of parties formed out of the Solidarity movement, which had originally opposed the communist regime and negotiated the transition (Stanley 2013). Next to different stances on economic policy, the main difference lay in their attitudes to “decommunization,” in other words, their interpretation of the past communist regime and the “lustration” of political and civil service elites with communist affiliations. Despite these differences, when in government, both camps followed a project of economic reform and rapprochement with NATO and the EU.

However, by the 2005 elections, this divide morphed into a sociocultural divide, which pitted Law and Justice and the Civic Platform—as Poland’s two major parties—against each other. Both parties emerged from the Solidarity movement and pushed the post-communist left to the margins. The Civic Platform started out as an economically liberal and moderately conservative party but developed into a “catch-all” party that moderated its economic liberalism and embraced cultural liberalism. Law and Justice, in turn, took a populist route, railing against the alleged elite post-communist leftists and liberals (the “układ”) that had botched Poland’s transition and compromised its national identity. All elections since 2005 have been contests between PiS and PO.

The sociocultural divide represented by PiS and PO is essentially based on two different visions of Poland: a “modern” and a “traditional” Poland (Lewicki & Mandes 2015; Sałek & Sztajdel 2019; de Wilde 2019). It encompasses such issues as state–Church relations, moral values (such as the family, abortion, sexuality), and national sovereignty. While PiS emphasizes Poland’s Catholic identity, traditional morality, and embraces EU skepticism, PO has adopted a pro-European, more culturally liberal, and secularist stance. At the same time, both parties have converged on economic issues toward a welfare state agenda (Sałek & Sztajdel 2019).

In sociodemographic terms, this sociocultural divide is based on the divide between the “winners” and “losers” of Poland’s democratic transition and accession to the EU (Sałek & Sztajdel 2019). Support for the PO and its more liberal and Europeanist agenda comes mainly from urban and more highly educated voters in Poland’s Western provinces, which have benefited from the transition. In turn, support for the PiS is highest among the less educated rural population in Poland’s Eastern provinces. Observers call this the divide between “Poland A and B”—the economically developed and urbanized Western versus the underdeveloped and rural Eastern provinces, a divide which arguably goes back historically to the partitions of Poland in the nineteenth century.

As our analysis has shown, the refugee issue has further politicized this pre-existing sociocultural divide in Poland. Based on their respective understandings of the Polish national identity and place in Europe, PiS and PO give different answers to the question of whether to receive refugees and cooperate with the EU.

6. Appendix

Table 6.2 Overview of sampled debates in the Polish Sejm and Senate

Date	Public forum	Topic	Speaker	Party affiliation
February 18, 2014	Sejm	Information of the prime minister on the situation in Ukraine	Kaczyński, Jarosław	PiS
			Tusk, Donald (Prime Minister)	PO
March 5, 2014	Senate	Information of the minister of foreign affairs on the situation in Ukraine	Pelczyńska-Nałęcz, Katarzyna (Undersecretary of State in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs)	—
May 7, 2014	Sejm	Debate on the Act of Protection of Foreigners	Rogala, Rafał (Head of the Office for Foreigners)	—
			Wóźniak, Grzegorz Adam	PiS
September 16, 2015	Sejm	Information of the minister on the refugee crisis in Europe and its ramifications for Poland	Bauć, Piotr Paweł	RP
			Godson, John Abraham	PSL
			Gowin, Jarosław	United Right
			Grupiński, Rafał	PO
			Iwiński, Tadeusz	SLD
			Jaki, Patryk	United Poland
			Kaczyński, Jarosław	PiS
			Kopacz, Ewa (Prime Minister)	PO
Wziątek, Stanisław	SLD			
October 2, 2016	Sejm	Report of the European Union Affairs Committee on the EU relocation mechanism,	Chruszcz, Sylwester	Kukiz'15
			Głębocki, Konrad	PiS
			Głogowski, Tomasz	PO
			Golbik, Marta	Nowoczesna
			Kloc, Izabela (Rapporteur)	PiS

Date	Public forum	Topic	Speaker	Party affiliation
			Możdżanowska, Andżelika	PSL
			Zwiercan, Małgorzata	Free and Solidary
October 19, 2016	Senate	Report of the European Union Affairs Committee on the EU relocation mechanism	Augustyn, Mieczysław	PO
			Bonkowski, Waldemar	PiS
			Obremski, Jarosław (Rapporteur)	PiS
			Rulewski, Jan	PO
			Żaryn, Jan	PiS

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PART III

**RESPONDING TO REFUGEE CRISES
IN OTHER WORLD REGIONS**

Pan-African solidarity and international reputation

Uganda's policy of open doors toward refugees

1. Introduction

Uganda is one of the world's most impoverished and least economically developed countries. According to the Human Development Index (HDI), which attempts to measure the degree of development of societies considering three different dimensions—standard of living (measured by gross national income per capita), education (measured by mean years in school), and health (assessed by life expectancy)—Uganda ranks 166 out of 189 countries ([Human Development Report 2022](#)). Poverty is also widespread in Uganda. Taking into account the three dimensions of the HDI, 55.1 percent of the population of Uganda is classified as “multidimensionally poor,” while an additional 24.9 percent is classified as vulnerable. At the same time, Uganda hosts the highest number of refugees of all African countries and holds one of the top positions globally for hosting refugees. According to the latest report of the UNHCR, Uganda has opened its borders to about 1.5 million refugees and asylum seekers. Around 854,000 are from South Sudan, and almost half a million are from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Uganda ranks sixth in the world after Turkey, Iran, Colombia, Germany, and Pakistan in the list of countries that have taken in the most refugees ([UNHCR 2023a](#)).

How can a country as poor and underdeveloped as Uganda admit so many refugees? And how do Uganda's politicians legitimize their open-door policy? One significant factor certainly is that Uganda is immediately bordering countries that are struck by wars and massive internal conflicts, forcing people to flee. Unlike Europe, which is shielded by the Mediterranean Sea, Uganda is less able to control its borders. But this is, by far, not the whole story. The government makes no effort to prevent or limit refugee immigration. On the contrary, it welcomes refugees and gives them many rights. Refugees are granted land and the freedom of movement, the right to work, to establish a business, to own property, and to access education and social services ([Hargrave et al. 2020](#)). Uganda is applauded by the international community for its progressive refugee policy and proclaimed as a role model. When Pope Francis visited Uganda in 2016, he praised Uganda for its response in welcoming refugees and said: “Here in East Africa, Uganda has shown outstanding concern for

welcoming refugees, enabling them to rebuild their lives in security with a sense of dignity” (*Voice of America* 2015).

Some studies have pointed out that Uganda receives a great deal of financial support for its policy from international institutions and Western countries (Betts 2021) as an explanation for its open refugee policy. But government self-interest cannot be the only motive for its open-door policy, considering that Uganda’s state budget is burdened with expenses for its refugee policy, as foreign aid is not enough to support refugees in Uganda (Sebba & Zanker 2022: 8). Like the other chapters in this book, we argue that Uganda’s stance on admitting refugees is embedded in and shaped by its understanding of the nation’s collective identity and how it interprets refugees. The government and the opposition parties define Uganda as an African country that shares cultural and ethnic similarities with other African countries. Its borders are seen as artificial, a foreign construct dating back to colonialism. In this way, the nation-state boundary of belonging is extended, and refugees are included in the definition of the “we.” A second feature that consistently appears in the speeches of Ugandan politicians is the emphasis on the international significance of Uganda’s refugee policy. Uganda’s politicians interpret their country as a role model in terms of fulfilling the values of the international community. It is argued that this international reputation, of which Uganda is proud, must be protected by continuing an open refugee policy. Finally, Uganda is framed as a former refugee-generating country that owes gratitude to other countries for taking in Ugandans in the past and therefore has an obligation to admit refugees in the present.

Congruent with this definition of Uganda’s collective identity are the characteristics attributed to refugees. Both the government and the opposition parties portray refugees mainly in cultural and moral terms. The term “brothers and sisters” is used to emphasize the cultural and ethnic commonalities between Uganda’s citizens and the people coming from neighboring countries. In moral terms, refugees are framed as people in dire need who urgently need support. Even if refugees are also interpreted as a burden in some speeches, the blame is attributed less to the refugees themselves than to difficult circumstances and the failure of policies on the ground.

Although Uganda hosts a large number of refugees, the issue has surprisingly not sparked much debate within the Ugandan parliament and is by and large supported by the opposition parties, despite some specific criticisms, which refer mainly to the implementation of the refugee policy at the local level. There are also very few differences between the political camps in framing Uganda’s collective identity and refugees. One reason that Uganda’s refugee policy is not a point of contention between the government and the opposition might have to do with Uganda’s authoritarian regime. Parliamentary elections are not fair, and the parties’ freedom of expression is restricted. But this does not seem to be the most important reason the opposition does not criticize the government’s refugee policy because it sharply criticizes the government in other policy areas, such as accusing the government of being corrupt. An alternative explanation is that Uganda’s open-door policy enjoys very strong popular support, so the opposition sees no opportunity for political gain from raising the issue of refugees. In this regard, the results of a survey are particularly

telling: When asked how well the government has managed to help refugees, 28 percent responded “very well” and 53 percent “well,” which adds up to 81 percent who are satisfied with the government’s policy. And when asked whether the respondent welcomes or dislikes the local government’s support of the refugees, 77 percent responded that they welcome the local government’s efforts, and 20 percent of the 77 percent are even very supportive of the policy ([International Rescue Committee 2018](#)).

Our findings are based on a discourse analysis of debates in the Ugandan parliament and selected speeches outside parliament. It should be noted that we are not the first to analyze Uganda’s refugee policy. A recent and excellent overview of the evolution of Uganda’s refugee policy from its beginnings to the present is provided by Alexander [Betts \(2021\)](#). Because Uganda’s open refugee policy enjoys considerable international political attention, it has been described in a variety of policy reports, all of which are highly informative but often overlap in their specific content ([Ahimbisibwe 2018](#); [Coggio 2018](#); [Crawford et al. 2019](#); [DESA 2022](#); [Hargrave et al. 2020](#); [Hovil 2018](#); [Omata 2020](#); [Sebba & Zanker 2022](#)). These publications describe the history and various facets of Uganda’s refugee policy, with a particular focus on issues of policy implementation and the conflicts that arise, especially at regional and local levels. However, a systematic discourse analysis that examines the framing of the refugee issue by political parties is not yet available; only the paper by Karen Hargrave, Irina Mosel, and Amy Leach (2020) dedicate several pages to this topic. The authors emphasize that the government of Uganda uses the open refugee policy to enhance Uganda’s international reputation and obtain aid from abroad, a result consistent with one of our findings. Hargrave et al.’s brief remarks are not based on a systematic discourse analysis but rather on impressions gained from the authors’ country knowledge of Uganda. Our analysis comes to more nuanced conclusions and distinguishes several frames.

2. Background of the debate

2.1 Country information

Uganda became independent from the UK in 1962. As with many other former colonies, Uganda’s borders were artificially drawn. The country unites various ethnic groups and former kingdoms. The difference between the Nilotic North and the Bantu South was politically significant from the beginning. Under British colonial rule, the economic, political, and cultural center was in the South. The long-standing conflict between the center and the periphery also structured the postcolonial period ([Reid 2017](#)). Time and again in Uganda’s very violent history, the relative autonomy of former kingdoms and the power of the central state have been at stake, and with it, the rivalry between different regions, ethnic groups, and their leaders. These conflicts led to civil wars and a succession of rulers who governed the country in an authoritarian manner and with brutal violence ([Ingham 2022](#)).

Milton Obote was the country's first post-independence prime minister and then president, who, shortly after taking office, became an authoritarian ruler. In 1971 he was overthrown by his military chief, Idi Amin, whose troops killed many of Obote's supporters. Obote had to leave the country and invaded Uganda with troops from Tanzania in 1972 to regain power. Subsequently, Uganda's troops invaded Tanzania, leading to the Uganda–Tanzania War, at the end of which Idi Amin had to flee, and Milton Obote became president of Uganda for the second time in 1980. However, the violent conflicts within Uganda did not stop. Yoweri Museveni, the current president of Uganda, founded the guerrilla group National Resistance Movement (NRM), which fought against the Obote government, steadily extended the area under its control, and finally assumed power in 1986. To this day, the NRM, under Museveni's leadership, rules the country. It has imprinted its ideology and policies profoundly on the country.

The NRM was a resistance movement that, in terms of its organizational structure and ideological orientation, absorbed and integrated elements of Marxism and the views of Ernesto “Che” Guevara and Mao Zedong. These elements include Socialist and anti-colonial ideas, creating a centralized organization, and formulating moral requirements for its members. The organization should not be detached from the people, always maintaining contact with the population to provide the political education necessary to organize the people (Stremlau 2018). The NRM was also guided by Pan-Africanism; it does not seem coincidental that Museveni wrote his thesis on Frantz Fanon as a student (Taylor 2021).

Once in power, the National Resistance Movement led by Museveni restored the old kingdoms, thereby contributing to the pacification of regional conflicts. Political parties were banned based on the argument that they would be formed along ethnic and regional lines and thus endanger the unity of the country and hinder economic modernization (Taylor 2021). Instead, NRM relied on mobilizing citizens through the party's various sub-organizations, much as Socialist parties elsewhere have attempted (Stremlau 2018). In 1996, presidential elections were held, which Museveni won. Since 2006, elections have been nominally based on a multiparty system, but Uganda is still a one-party dominant political system. All elections have been characterized by massive obstruction of the opposition parties' mobilization and accusations of electoral fraud by national and international observers.

Uganda has been ruled by Yoweri Museveni since 1986. Even though the NRM has evolved from a Socialist guerrilla movement to a state party, some elements of the former ideology of liberation are still relevant today (Taylor 2021; Stremlau 2018). These ideas include a critique of colonialism and, related to this criticism, an ideology of Pan-African solidarity among all those countries that have suffered from colonial oppression. It also includes skepticism about a multiparty system and representative democracy, as it is assumed that different political parties would reinforce ethnic differences that have led to civil wars in the past. Ultimately, modernizing Uganda is the NRM's central objective. For example, the 2016 NRM party program defines its goals as maintaining Uganda's internal security and transforming it economically into a middle-income country (National Resistance Movement 2016). This agenda

includes industrializing the country and improving education, the health system, and infrastructure. In terms of foreign policy, the aim is to improve economic and military cooperation between the African states and, above all, the Eastern African region.

The balance of Museveni's long period of government has been ambivalent (Sejjaaka 2004). Uganda's internal security has improved significantly. The civil war between different groups has largely been pacified. Uganda's level of economic development and modernization has improved slightly in recent decades, as data from the Human Development Index show (Human Development Report 2022), although Uganda remains one of the poorest countries in the world. In other areas, however, no positive developments can be observed. According to the V-Dem Democracy Index, Uganda has not seen any improvement during the period from 1990 to 2020 (V-Dem Institute 2021). The same holds true for corruption. Uganda is the 142nd most corrupt country out of 180 countries, according to the 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index reported by Transparency International (2022). Also, in this respect, there has been no improvement in recent years.

And yet, Museveni's government enjoys international prestige and is praised by many Western governments. For example, the introductory statement on the website of the German Ministry for Development, which coordinates Germany's cooperation with Uganda, states:

Uganda has become a stabilizing political force in East Africa in recent years. In a region that has repeatedly been one of Africa's conflict hotspots in the past and is still the scene of armed conflicts and large refugee movements today, Uganda is actively working for peace, security, and regional cooperation. The country's economic development is also solid, despite major challenges such as widespread corruption and high population growth. (Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung 2023, own translation)

Similar statements can be found on the websites of the EU and the US government (European Union External Action 2021; US Department of State 2022). Particular emphasis is placed on Uganda's refugee policy, which is strongly supported financially by the international community.

What exactly constitutes Uganda's refugee policy, which has been praised by many international actors? Uganda has signed the main international treaties concerning refugees, including the 1951 Refugee Convention, its 1967 Protocol, and the Organization of African Unity Convention in 1987 (DESA 2022). The latter is significant because it contains a more extended definition of the refugee than the 1951 Refugee Convention, including those who flee "external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order" (Article 1(2)). Furthermore, Uganda was one of the countries that strongly promoted the "African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa" (known as the "Kampala Convention"). The treaty was one of the first that focused on the protection of internally displaced persons. It was adopted in Kampala in 2009; Uganda was the first country to ratify it.

Uganda's current national legislation regarding refugees derives from the 2006 "Refugee Act" and the 2010 "Refugees Regulations" (Betts 2021). Uganda does not deny any refugee access to the country and does not distinguish between refugees based on ethnic criteria. The law distinguishes between two types of refugees: refugees who are immediately recognized as refugees on the basis of their country of origin and refugees who are required to submit an individual application for asylum. Refugees from neighboring South Sudan and Congo are granted *prima facie* refugee status upon arrival. People from other countries have to apply for individual refugee status. The vast majority of Uganda's refugees belong to the first group; only 43,387 persons belong to the second (Sebba & Zanker 2022: 9). Right after the application, individual applicants are provided a Temporary Pass valid for ninety days, as evidence that they have already applied for the status determination. Following the procedure, if the person is granted refugee status, they are issued a refugee identification document. If the application is rejected or the applicant exhausts the procedure, they are deported.

The treatment of refugees in Uganda follows a policy called the "Self-Reliance Strategy," which was developed and implemented by the UNHCR together with the government of Uganda starting in 1999 (Hovil 2018), but its roots lie earlier (Betts 2021). The basic idea is that refugees should not be directly dependent on international and national aid but should be enabled and empowered to provide for themselves. Refugees are not housed in large camps but in rural settlements, where refugees and host communities coexist. They receive land to cultivate, free access to the health system, and the children have access to education. These regulations are praised as the most progressive refugee regulations in Africa (Crawford et al. 2019). However, various studies have pointed out that Uganda's official policy is not necessarily congruent with what happens on the ground (Hovil 2018; Hargrave et al. 2020; Sebba & Zanker 2022). Among the issues discussed are the following: As the number of refugees increased, the land available became increasingly scarce; thus, the land allocated turned out to be insufficient for people to feed themselves, and local authorities had to be bribed to obtain additional land. Finally, the health system was not adequately equipped to provide treatment for all, and the quality of schooling turned out to be rather poor. Accordingly, the *de facto* refugee integration policy—not the admission policy—is viewed critically by some observers (Hargrave et al. 2020).

Uganda's open-door refugee policy and its support by international organizations and Western governments are interpreted by some scholars as a win-win situation (Betts 2021; Sebba & Zanker 2022). Whereas Western governments have an interest in ensuring that refugee movements triggered by regional conflicts remain local and that refugees do not attempt to reach the prosperous societies of the West, Uganda's government uses its refugee policy as a strategic tool, which comes with two advantages. First, the open refugee policy leads to large international financial support for the country, enabling the government "to strengthen patronage and assert authority over strategically important refugee-hosting hinterlands" (Betts 2021: 275). Second, it enhances the international reputation of the country, which would otherwise come under greater criticism for restricting democracy and violating human rights. However, this does not seem to be the whole story. As our discourse analysis shows,

Uganda's open refugee policy is embedded in and shaped by how it defines its collective identity, which, besides other characteristics, includes a Pan-African ideology blurring the symbolic boundaries between African states.

2.2 Critical discourse moments: The conflicts in South Sudan and the DR Congo

Although Uganda has a long history of hosting refugees, our analysis refers to the years 2011 to 2021, a period in which the number of refugees increased dramatically. As of 2011, the total refugee population in Uganda was around 160,000 people. At the end of 2015, the number had more than tripled and reached around 500,000. The next dramatic increase took place after 2015, following the escalation of the war in South Sudan. With about 1.5 million refugees as of 2022, Uganda ranks sixth on the list of countries that have received the most refugees in the world (UNHCR 2023a).¹ Almost 90 percent of Uganda's refugees stem from two countries: 57 percent are from South Sudan and 32 percent from the Democratic Republic of Congo.² In both countries, armed conflicts between different groups are why many people have had to leave and seek refuge in neighboring Uganda, among other places.

South Sudan became independent from Sudan only in 2011, after a civil war between the North and the South that lasted for decades. Uganda was a long-term ally of South Sudan. But by 2013, renewed conflict erupted within South Sudan, leading to a new civil war. The conflict was triggered by President Salva Kiir accusing his then vice president and the leader of the opposition party Riek Machar of planning a coup. A crucial aspect of the conflict, though not the only one, is the ethnic dimension. President Kiir is from the Dinka ethnicity, the biggest ethnic group in South Sudan (36 percent of the population), whereas former Vice President Machar is from the Nuer ethnicity, the second biggest ethnic group (16 percent). The two leaders instrumentalized the ethnic hostilities for their personal political ambitions (Koos & Gutschke 2014). Several attempts to reach a peace agreement between the rivaling groups failed until 2020 (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2022). In 2020, President Salva Kiir and his rival, Riek Machar, formed a united government. However, the agreement concluded between the counterparts is very fragile.

The civil war led to a large number of deaths, a further economic decline in South Sudan, which was already very poor, and the flight of many people. Approximately 383,000 people are estimated to have died as a result of the civil war as of 2020 (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2022). Around 3.8 million people have been displaced by the end of 2022, about 1.5 million internally and 2.3 million externally, by fleeing to neighboring countries, especially Uganda, Sudan, and Kenya (UNHCR 2023a). Uganda is an ally of President Kiir. However, Uganda's refugee acceptance policy is not significantly

¹ It should be noted that Uganda closed its borders after March 2020 for some time due to the rapid spread of Covid-19. However, given that this policy was implemented in many countries, one cannot interpret the border closure as a change in Uganda's refugee policy.

² Followed by refugees from Somalia, Burundi, Eritrea, and people from other African countries (UNHCR 2023b).

affected by its position in this conflict, as it hosts South Sudanese refugees from various ethnic groups.

The second largest refugee group in Uganda comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo. With almost 90 million inhabitants, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is one of the largest countries in Africa. Internal tensions in DRC have existed since the country achieved independence from Belgium in 1960. These tensions led to a series of secessionist movements and armed conflicts between different groups and the central government. These clashes continue to this day (Marriage 2021). Armed conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo include the Kivu conflict in the east of the country and the Ituri conflict in the northeast, where two different ethnic groups confront each other. The consequences of the violent conflicts are similar to those in other countries: brutal violence against the population, rape, hunger, and displacement, with the result that many people have fled within the country or sought refuge across the borders in neighboring countries. By the end of 2022, about 5.5 million people were displaced within the DRC, and almost 1.1 million had crossed borders to seek asylum in other African countries (UNHCR 2023a).

2.3 Description of the forum, political actors, and debates

As in the other chapters, our discourse analysis focuses primarily on parliamentary debates. The Ugandan parliamentary system consists of one chamber. Our analyses cover two parliamentary cycles, from 2011 to 2016 and 2016 to 2021. The composition of the parliament changed very little after the 2016 election. In both parliaments, President Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement won the most seats by far, followed by the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC). Other parties were hardly successful and won only a few seats (see Table 7.1). In the 2011 presidential election, Museveni received 68.3 percent, and in the 2016 election, 60.6 percent of the votes (Electoral Commission 2016). Parliamentary and presidential elections were held again in 2021. Museveni was re-elected as president, and the composition of parliament did not change significantly compared to the previous election period. Parliamentary debates after the 2021 election are not included in our analysis.

The success of the National Resistance Movement in the parliamentary elections and of Museveni in the presidential elections is due to several factors. First, the elections were partially undemocratic, even when multiple parties or candidates were on the ballot (Gibb 2012, 2016). Candidates from opposition parties were systematically intimidated and threatened by the government. To limit mobilization, the government blocked social media channels. Furthermore, election observers found irregularities in the counting of votes. Finally, the parties' chances to mobilize their constituencies were unequal, as the financial resources available to the ruling party for the election were twelve times higher than those available to all opposition parties (Gibb 2016). Second, there are factors responsible for the NRM's success that cannot be criticized from a democratic perspective. The government has delivered policies

Table 7.1 Number of seats per party in the parliament of Uganda, 2011–2021

Party	8th term (2011–2016)	9th term (2016–2021)
National Resistance Movement (NRM)	263	293
Forum for Democratic Change (FDC)	34	36
Democratic Party (DP)	12	15
Uganda People’s Congress (UPC)	10	6
Justice Forum (JJF)	1	-
Conservative Party (CP)	1	-
Independent	43	66
Uganda’s People’s Defense Force	10	10
Total	375	426

Note: A number of seats are reserved for special interest groups in Uganda’s parliament, including ten seats for the Uganda People’s Defense Force. In addition, one seat per district is reserved for women (for more details, see [Gibb 2012](#)).

Source: [Gibb 2012](#); 2016

that are highly appreciated by Uganda’s citizens. These include major investments in primary and secondary education, the expansion of the transportation infrastructure, and, most importantly, the improvement of homeland security ([Gibb 2016](#)). Uganda has experienced decades of civil war; against this backdrop, Museveni’s authoritarian rule seems primarily associated with security and appreciated by its citizens.

A look at the NRM’s election programs shows that the specific policy goals are very poorly spelled out. Defined goals are mainly directed toward economic modernization. Museveni positions himself as a pragmatist. In the 2016 NRM election program, he says:

We take from every system what is best for us and we reject what is bad for us. We do not judge the economic programs of other nations because we believe that each nation knows best how to address the needs of its people. The NRM is neither pro-West nor pro-East—it is pro-Uganda ([National Resistance Movement 2016](#): 13)

The strongest opposition party, the Forum for Democratic Change, also has a low programmatic profile. FDC was founded in 2004. Its former leader Kizza Besigye is a former companion of Yoweri Museveni. The party shares the modernization goals with the NRM. However, it advocates a democratic renewal of all institutions, criticizes government corruption, and promises to reorganize Uganda into a federal state ([Gibb 2012](#)). The issue of refugees is a topic to which neither the government nor the opposition assigned any importance during the 2011 and 2016 election campaigns ([Sebba & Zanker 2022](#)). In the party programs of NRM and FDC, the word “refugee” is not mentioned at all. This absence is particularly interesting with respect to the opposition party. Since it sharply criticizes the government about other policy areas, one can conclude that it agrees with the government’s refugee policy.

Parliamentary debates are available online in the Uganda parliamentary archive. We downloaded all debates from the two election periods in which the number of refugees increased dramatically (2011 to 2021) and then searched for the terms “refugee” and “asylum seeker.” We did not include those documents in which one of the two terms appeared but which do not address the refugee issue in any substantial manner (for example, documents that only mention the “Minister for Refugees”). But even after having excluded this material, it turned out that there were no fundamental and extended debates in the Ugandan parliament on admitting refugees or related policies. Instead, the issue came up now and then; the occasions were usually specific problems like allegations over the mismanagement of funds, alleged exaggerations of the number of refugees hosted in Uganda, and trafficking of refugee women. But these issues have never led to a fundamental debate on the admission of refugees.

In total, we found thirty-four such events. Usually, one or up to six deputies spoke during such an event. Those taking part in the debate included members of the government belonging to the National Resistance Movement, NRM deputies, and deputies of the strongest opposition party, Forum for Democratic Change. In addition, one military and one independent MP contributed to the discussion. All statements were very short. In addition to the statements of the Members of Parliament, we analyzed two speeches by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni from 2016 and 2017 and a statement by Prime Minister Ruhakana Rugunda from 2018. All three speeches focus on Uganda’s refugee policy. Museveni’s 2016 speech was given at the “Leaders’ Summit on Refugees,” which took place in New York City hosted by US President Barack Obama. His 2017 speech was delivered at the “Solidarity Summit on Refugees” in Kampala to raise support for the refugees from the international community. Finally, Prime Minister Rugunda’s statement was given on the occasion of “World Refugee Day.” An overview of all debates and speeches analyzed can be found in Table 7.3 in the appendix.

To validate the results of our discourse analysis, we conducted two interviews with social science researchers who have done fieldwork in Uganda and published on Uganda’s refugee policy. Their comments on our analyses contributed to slight, but not substantial, changes in our interpretations. Both stressed that there is consensus between the government and the opposition on the general outlines of Uganda’s refugee policy. Dissent and conflict are found more at the level of implementation and in the regions where many refugees live. However, these local conflicts do not lead to an overall rejection of the open border policy.

3. The positioning and framing of the NRM government and opposition parties

Three features of Uganda’s parliamentary discourse on refugees must be highlighted, as they have consequences for the way we present our findings. First, our discourse analysis covers ten years and two election periods. During the ten years, the number

of refugees in Uganda has increased dramatically. We originally analyzed the two election periods separately to examine whether political actors' positioning or framing changed over time. However, our analysis reveals that neither political actors' policy position nor their framing of the refugee issue has fundamentally changed. Although problems arising from immigration are discussed more frequently over time, a fundamentally different view of refugees was not identified.

Second, Uganda's refugees come mainly from two countries and are of different ethnicities. Some of these refugees belong to ethnic groups also living in Uganda. Other studies have shown that refugees ethnically similar to the people in the host country are more likely to be admitted and more positively framed (e.g., [Abdelaaty 2021](#)). We examined whether this is also the case in Uganda. The results show that MPs do not discriminate between different ethnic groups, neither in their policy positions nor in their framing.

Finally, and more importantly, we examined whether MPs from the government and the opposition parties differ systematically. We find only slight differences between individual MPs but no differences between the government and the opposition parties. As discussed above, there may be different reasons for this. As the rights and freedom of expression of the opposition parties in Uganda are restricted, the opposition may be reluctant to criticize the government's refugee policy. However, the opposition does criticize other governmental policies, which makes it less likely that restrictions on freedom of speech are the reason for not criticizing the government on its refugee policy. A second reason may be that the opposition does not take up the refugee issue because the government's policy enjoys very strong support among the population, so the opposition sees no chance of gaining possible voter support. The survey cited previously shows that the government's refugee policy is indeed very strongly supported by Uganda's citizens.

These three characteristics of the debate have consequences for the presentation of our results. There is no need to address the evolution of the debate, the question of whether refugees of different ethnicities are framed differently, nor the differences between the government and the opposition.

3.1 Positioning: Open doors for all who are in humanitarian need

As discussed above, Uganda pursues an open-door refugee policy. In the speeches we analyzed, no politician argues for abandoning this policy. Even as the number of refugees increased dramatically, MPs emphasize that Uganda's borders must remain open to refugees and that Uganda stands by its international obligations: "Uganda is a State Party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol, as well as the 1969 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) 'Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugees in Africa.' The universal human rights that are most relevant to the refugees are well known to Uganda" (Lawrence Biyika Onegiu, NRM, July 15, 2020).

President Museveni supports this position in several statements: “The poor refugees, having run from their tormentors, must be treated humanely by the countries of their refuge” (Yoweri Museveni, NRM, September 20, 2016). Likewise, former Prime Minister Ruhakana Rugunda explicitly appreciates the efforts of the host communities: “We acknowledge and salute the openness, generosity and resilience of host communities who open their homes and share whatever they have with the refugees” (Ruhakana Rugunda, NRM, June 20, 2018).

However, since the dramatic growth in refugee numbers in 2016, there has also been a discussion of measures to reduce the number of refugees. Rather than restricting access to Uganda, the government suggests that Uganda should take part in the initiatives to bring peace and stability to its neighboring regions. According to the prime minister, this is the only way to stop people from running away from their homelands and take refuge in Uganda: “[U]ltimately the answer is to stop the refugees from running away from South Sudan or the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Government of Uganda and our President in particular have been spearheading this regional effort to bring an end to that conflict” (Ruhakana Rugunda, NRM, February 15, 2017).

Even if the open refugee policy is not fundamentally questioned, some politicians point out that the strong increase of refugees leads to conflicts over land, firewood, water, and other resources (Sebba & Zanker 2022). A variety of policies are discussed that aim at a better integration of refugees and the resolution of conflicts between refugees and locals. Among the measures called for are better support for municipalities, a fairer distribution of funds, and improved security by providing better equipment for the police. However, in the debates about individual measures, the basic consensus of an open refugee policy remains untouched. The opposition parties have not changed their policy position on this either.

3.2 Who are “we”? Africans who value Pan-African solidarity and aspire to international recognition

Like in the previous chapters, we argue that Uganda’s refugee policy is shaped by and in line with the way its collective identity is characterized. Three features of the definition of the “we,” which we rank in order of importance, are particularly significant.

Blurring the nation-state’s boundary by defining Uganda as an African country: A key aspect of the government’s and opposition party’s identity framing is *cultural*. Both camps define Uganda as an African country that shares cultural and ethnic similarities with other African countries. In this way, the boundary of belonging is extended beyond Uganda’s borders, and refugees are included in the definition of the “we.” Like the discourse of the AKP government in Turkey (see Chapter 4), the term “brother” is used to emphasize the commonalities between different countries and their people. Here is the voice of an MP of the opposition party Forum for Democratic Change:

One is about brotherhood. If you look at it from the Pan Africanism angle, the highest level of state-to-state relationship down to the people, some of which may not know the meaning of the word “state,” you will realise that they call each other brothers. For example, the Madi community in Uganda has brothers among the Madi community in the Republic of Southern Sudan; and the Acholi community in Uganda know that they have their brothers, the Acholi community in the Republic of Southern Sudan. So, to that level, the people of Uganda particularly those from the North feel that there was something good happening to their brothers across the border. (Hassan Fungaroo, FDC, July 13, 2011)

Accordingly, Uganda’s borders and those of other African states are interpreted as artificial because they were imposed by colonial powers. In a speech delivered at a summit on refugees in New York City hosted by US President Barack Obama, Uganda’s President Museveni emphasizes this artificial drawing of African borders: “We do not pay attention to the colonial borders which some actors, oblivious of the higher African interest, fetishize as if they were made by God when, in fact, they were made by imperialists in Berlin in 1884 when Africans were asleep and disorganized” (Yoweri Museveni, NRM, September 20, 2016).

Museveni here refers to the Berlin Conference (1884–85), also known as the “Congo Conference,” at which European countries negotiated their claims to African territory, while leaders from Africa were not invited and had no say. According to Museveni, African borders do not reflect actual differences between the African people; they separate people who belong together. His remarks contain an explicit anti-colonial tone, as he takes pride in the resistance against colonialism: “Eventually, we rallied and resisted colonialism, leading to our victory starting with the Independence of Ghana, in 1957” (Yoweri Museveni, NRM, September 20, 2016).

One minister illustrates the artificiality of borders going back to colonialism with reference to his own regional origin: “I come from Northern Uganda and the separation between Uganda and Southern Sudan was by the acts of drawing an artificial line and if that line was brought one degree further down, I would have been in Southern Sudan by now and would be called a Southern Sudanese” (Henry Okello Oryem, NRM, July 13, 2011).

An international role model in terms of fulfilling the values of the international community: A second feature that appears in politicians’ speeches is the emphasis on the *international* significance of Uganda’s refugee policy, as most clearly expressed in the following quotes:

The first is that internationally, Uganda is shining. Everybody is praising Uganda’s policy of welcoming these people, putting them in camps, giving them pieces of land and allowing them to do all that our people are doing. (Moses Ali, NRM, February 13, 2018)

Uganda is celebrated in the continent for its effectiveness and good policies in ensuring that it hosts the different asylum seekers and refugees in the continent.

During the just concluded sitting of the Pan African Parliament, in Midrand, South Africa this year, the Pan African Parliament, in its resolutions, overwhelmingly recognized Uganda for its treatment and hospitality to refugees, to the host communities of the refugees in Uganda and the wonderful policies in place enabling everyone to feel comfortable in Uganda. (Jacquiline Amongin, NRM, May 23, 2019)

In the view of its politicians, the fact that Uganda accepts so many refugees and grants them many rights demonstrates that the country supports international humanitarian standards. They highlight that Uganda has signed all relevant international agreements, has a long history of hosting refugees, and that the country's open refugee policy of the present is rooted in its history and identity:

Uganda is a signatory to both the Geneva and AU Conventions governing refugees and has been hosting refugees first in 1945 to 1946, the police refugees in Mukono and Masindi. During the post-independence period, Uganda hosted a large number of refugees from Rwanda, Sudan and Congo. Currently, there are over 400,000 refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan. (Musa Ecweru, NRM, December 10, 2014)

Uganda's high international standing is referenced by both the governing party and the opposition. MPs from the opposition who criticize the government's mismanagement of refugee funds, a widely publicized scandal that came to light in 2018, do so, among other reasons, to protect Uganda's reputation in the world:

I know most Members could have read in the newspapers last week, the issue surrounding the misappropriation of the refugee funds in the Office of the Prime Minister. Uganda has been shining, being the best host country for refugees. So it was disheartening to learn and read from the press that the resources have been mismanaged. I think, as a country, we need to protect that good name. (Elijah Okupa, FDC, February 14, 2018)

Uganda's self-portrayal as a model for Africa and the world is underscored by making two comparisons. First, Uganda shows solidarity with the refugees, although it has few resources compared to other countries, as it is one of the poorest countries in the world. Second, Uganda is interpreted as a politically stable country, especially in comparison to its neighboring countries. Above all, the government emphasizes that it has succeeded in establishing and guaranteeing peace and security:

They run to Uganda because Uganda is peaceful. They run to Uganda because their countries have failed to protect them... No Ugandan should do anything that compromises the peace we have. No Ugandan should be allowed to do anything that can compromise the unity this country has. No Ugandan should be allowed to do anything that could cause Uganda to become a refugee-generating country. Having said that, we will stand ready and we will command all peace-loving Ugandans to stand ready to defend the peace and unity this country has so that we can

never become a refugee-generating country. I thank you very much for your kind attention. (Musa Ecweru, NRM, August 8, 2019)

As other scholars have pointed out, Uganda's self-interpretation as a country pursuing a progressive refugee policy is embedded in President Museveni's broader international policy that serves two purposes: a financial backing of Uganda by Western countries and international organizations and an enhancement of its international reputation that distracts from the fact that Museveni governs his country in an authoritarian manner (Betts 2021: 3).

"We were refugees as well": Thirdly, MPs use a *moral framing* by referring to Uganda's history. Uganda was a refugee-generating country in the past, even if it is now a refugee-hosting country. Many Ugandans were forced to leave the country during the armed conflicts under the regimes of Milton Obote and Idi Amin. According to the MP's framing, the experience of having once been refugees themselves creates a moral obligation to receive refugees with open arms now. As the prime minister says in a debate in parliament: "Finally, let us do our best to support our brothers and sisters who are in distress. Today it is them but as you very well know, some years ago it was us" (Ruhakana Rugunda, NRM, February 15, 2017).

MP Wamanga Wamai from the opposition party Forum for Democratic Change makes a similar argument: "We know where we have come from, Mr Speaker. Ugandans were living all over the world; some of us were living like refugees and we were received and we lived in all these countries" (Jack Wamanga Wamai, FDC, November 13, 2013).

3.3 Who are "they"? African brothers and sisters in humanitarian need who might become a burden

Refugees are portrayed primarily in a positive light by both the government and the opposition. No distinction is made between the various ethnic groups of refugees, such that refugees who are ethnically similar to the ethnic groups living in Uganda are not given any preference. If we compare the debates that took place between 2011 and 2016 with those from 2016 to 2021, the number of negative attributes only increased slightly. The way that politicians frame the refugees is mostly complementary to the interpretation of Uganda's national identity.

People in humanitarian need: Refugees are portrayed by the government and the main opposition party in *moral* terms as people in dire need and fleeing war: "We recognise the resilience that brings refugees to our doorstep in desperate situations in many cases, and usually traumatized by harrowing experiences before and during their journeys" (Ruhakana Rugunda, NRM, June 20, 2018).

When describing the hardships suffered by refugees, politicians place a special emphasis on the plight of women. An MP from the governing party NRM takes up a story he saw on television to call on the government to fulfill its humanitarian duty:

The other day, we watched on TV how refugee ladies cried. These ladies that go to get passports at immigration offices said officials from immigration office take advantage of them. Madam Speaker, these refugees come here because they have nowhere to sleep and most times they are taken advantage of. I wonder how we are going to help those ladies who were crying. It took time and they had to show it on TV. It was a sad story. I do not know whether we shall have another committee that will address sexual exploitation. (Henry Kibalya, NRM, April 12, 2018)

Refugees as African brothers and sisters: The humanitarian-moral view of refugees is further specified by a *cultural* framing. Refugees are interpreted as culturally alike and as family members, with similarity referring to two dimensions: a broader notion referring to the continent of Africa and the shared colonial past and a narrower notion of ethnic sameness.

With regard to refugees from South Sudan, both the government and the opposition emphasize that beyond belonging to different nation-states, Ugandans and South Sudanese have one thing in common, namely that they are Africans:

I would like to congratulate His Excellency, the President, for his key role in this region and in our country where the people of Southern Sudan, during their struggle, were not seen as refugees but as Africans. It has been the policy of the NRM that when Africans have problems in their countries and move to Uganda, they are seen as Africans, and they remain as Africans. No wonder the people of Southern Sudan have lived here, studied from here, done business from here and they take this country as their second home. (John Nasasira, NRM, July 13, 2011)

President Museveni describes the refugees in a very similar way: “The refugees that come to Uganda, are part of the cultural groups of the Great Lakes... the cultural relatives that were cut off by colonialism” (Yoweri Museveni, NRM, September 20, 2016). Thus, the refugees should not be considered different than Ugandans: “It is, therefore, not correct to treat African refugees as if they are flukers seeking to consume the resources of the indigenous people. I tell Ugandans that these are your unfortunate brothers and sisters having the misfortune, for the moment, of being misgoverned or being unprotected against demonic rebels” (Yoweri Museveni, NRM, September 20, 2016).

Ethnic similarities between refugees and people from Uganda are emphasized in some speeches. An independent MP refers to Rwandese refugees and argues that even in everyday life, refugees are indistinguishable from citizens of Uganda and should therefore be treated equally: “Our historical relation with our neighbours is well documented, and it is very difficult on an ordinary day to tell a Rwandese-Rwandese and a Rwandese-Ugandan. Across our borders, we have families that share a lot and it is the reason why I am concerned” (Mathias Mpuuga, Independent, November 13, 2013).

Entitled to the legal status of being a refugee: Uganda proudly presents itself as a refugee-welcoming country and a respected member of the international community. Consequently, refugees are characterized as persons entitled to certain rights under international law, which the Ugandan state must abide by. Lawrence Songa Biyika, an MP from the ruling party, reminds the government of the obligations derived from international law.

I rise on a matter of urgent importance concerning the plight of the refugees that the Government of Uganda allowed to enter Zombo District. These refugees are now living in fear of relocation to an unknown destination Madam Speaker. Uganda is a State Party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol, as well as the 1969 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) “Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugees in Africa.” The universal human rights that are most relevant to the refugees are well known to Uganda. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on the other hand promotes three durable solutions: voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement. Uganda went ahead to develop the Refugee Act, 2006, where Uganda’s asylum policies allow aliens who have lawfully entered Uganda to move freely in the country and to live where they may choose with rights, including freedom of movement and expression. (Lawrence Songa Biyika, NRM, July 15, 2020)

Refugees as a potential burden: With the rapid increase in the number of refugees from South Sudan, the number of discussions dealing with problems and conflicts caused by the influx of refugees increased. These problems are put on the agenda mainly by deputies from those regions where many refugees live, including from the governing party. They point out that the number of refugees can lead to a shortage of resources in several ways, which, in turn, can fuel competition between refugees and local residents so that refugees might be seen as a burden (Sebba & Zanker 2022). Interestingly, however, it is not the refugees who are held to be responsible for this situation. For example, Members of Parliament complain that refugees are supported with money and not with food. The UN is explicitly criticized in this respect since it helps refugees by providing cash rather than food, which leads to a shortage of food for the local population:

We expected the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to at least get food from other places where there is food because the local community does not have where to get food from. This is a very big problem and it has worsened the situation of food shortage in West Nile. (Isaac Etuka, NRM, February 14, 2017)

Another resource that has become scarce due to the increase in refugees is water and wood. Even if this leads to competition between refugees and the local population, the blame is not directly attributed to the refugees but to those actors who organize the distribution of resources, as the following quote shows: “More so, those agencies that are caring for the welfare of the refugees are drawing water from our already

drying rivers, especially in Maracha. Our rivers are being drained to supply water to the refugees” (Rose Ayaka, NRM, February 15, 2017).

The impact of immigration on forestry is a third issue that is discussed in the debates: “There is a problem of environmental degradation. Trees and grass are seriously cut by the refugees and this is affecting the climate and environment. For purposes of wood, fuel and shelter, the refugees use the natural resources there. This needs to be taken care of” (Hassan Fungaroo, FDC, March 15, 2018).

In all three cases, the deputies address problems caused by the influx of refugees. In contrast to other countries we have studied, however, they do not blame the refugees for existing problems. It is not demanded that Uganda should not take in any more refugees, but that the distribution of resources must be organized differently and that more aid is needed.

Refugees are, however, not only framed as a potential burden but also as an economic enrichment. This view is primarily held by the government, which sits in the capital, and not so much the perspective of the deputies who represent the interests of the regions where many refugees live. President Museveni sees refugees as people who will sooner or later return to their countries and then serve as partners stimulating economic exchange and growth:

The refugees from Rwanda that lived in Uganda for more than 30 years, when they got back to their country, one of the first things they did was to establish the first bus-service links between Rwanda and Uganda for the first time in the history of man. Therefore, the former refugees had turned into very useful business and development partners of their former hosts and vice-versa. (Yoweri Museveni, NRM, September 20, 2016)

Refugees as a potential security risk: Finally, refugees are interpreted as a potential security risk and associated with the issue of violence. The first aspect of violence relates to conflicts between different groups of refugees:

Initially, when they arrived, we handled them as our sisters and brothers from South Sudan and we did not separate them into ethnic groups. However, no sooner had they reached the camps than they started fighting along ethnic groups. So, we had no option but to separate them and put different ethnic groups in different areas of the camp. That goes to emphasize the fact, which I alluded to before, that the crisis in South Sudan had the potential of turning into genocide. (Crispus Kiyonga, NRM, January 14, 2014)

The second aspect of violence refers to the fact that some refugees are armed, which constitutes a serious security issue for the locals:

My district Amuru borders Southern Sudan and recently ... witnessed the influx of the community from South Sudan. They entered inside our district not through

the official border point but another point and when they came to Amuru, they moved with their herds of cattle and guns ... These people are posing a security threat to our community since they are moving with guns and whenever our local people move and meet them where they are staying, they normally cane them and caution the people of Amuru never to step where they are based. (Gilbert Olanya, Independent, April 30, 2014)

Last week on Sunday, we had a problem in Pakelle Sub-county ... The issue was that one of the refugees was suspected to be having a gun. Therefore, I request your ministry and Government to ensure that border districts are helped so that the people are protected from those who come from other countries. The refugees, especially, who move to and from should be prevented from entering Uganda with their guns... . They can turn around to be dangerous to the community because they are well trained. (Jessica Ababiku, Independent, September 3, 2015)

Interestingly, although the MPs from the opposition and the government address the issue of violence and armed refugees, they neither draw the conclusion that Uganda should not accept any more refugees nor do they interpret all refugees negatively: “So, if they are entering Uganda with guns—we are not saying they shouldn’t come here but they should not bring in the guns because we don’t have any war in Uganda” (Bitekerezo Kab, NRM, April 30, 2014).

4. Summary and accounting for differences between political parties

Uganda is known for its open refugee policy, often framed as progressive by international institutions. It hosts the largest number of refugees of all African countries and one of the largest in the world. Most of the 1.5 million refugees who have found shelter in Uganda come from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Although it would certainly be difficult for Uganda to close its borders with the conflict-ridden neighboring countries, the government also makes no effort to limit refugee immigration. On the contrary, it welcomes refugees and gives them many rights. Unlike many other countries, Uganda does not discriminate between refugees from different countries of origin and ethnicities. Overall, Uganda meets the standards codified in international refugee law.

Several factors can account for Uganda’s open-door policy. One certainly is that the NRM government under President Museveni receives strong financial support for this policy from international organizations and Western governments. The government has used these funds strategically to build clientelist networks with local authorities, as the study by [Betts \(2021\)](#) has pointed out. However, foreign aid is not enough to fully support refugees in Uganda. The government fills this gap in aid, dedicating approximately 39 percent of its sector management budget to its refugee policy ([Sebba and Zanker 2022](#): 8).

We argue that in addition to interest in attracting foreign aid, Uganda’s open-door policy is embedded in and shaped by its defined collective identity and the way refugees are framed. Table 7.2 summarizes the main frames used in the Ugandan discourse.

We do not discuss the individual frames again but focus on the cultural framing, which is the most significant in the discourse on admitting refugees. Uganda’s borders—and those of other African states—are interpreted as artificial, dating back to the time of colonialism. Uganda is defined as a country that shares cultural and ethnic similarities with other African and, especially, its neighboring countries. In this way, the in-group boundary is extended, and refugees are included in the definition of the “we.” Congruent with this cultural definition of Uganda’s collective identity are the characteristics attributed to refugees. Refugees are mainly portrayed in cultural and moral terms. They are defined as “brothers and sisters” to emphasize the cultural and ethnic commonalities between Uganda’s citizens and those from neighboring countries. Despite the fact that the sharp increase in the number of refugees since 2015 has contributed to problems of distribution of resources, and

Table 7.2 Positionings and framings in the debate on the admission of refugees in Uganda

Policy position	Open-door policy with very few restrictions and no discrimination between different groups of refugees	
Framing	Who are “we”?	Who are “they”?
Cultural	Pan-Africanism: Uganda is an African country sharing cultural similarities with other African countries and ethnicities. Africa’s national borders are artificial and the result of colonialism	Refugees are our African brothers and sisters
International	Uganda’s international reputation is enhanced by the country’s open refugee policy	—
Moral	As a former refugee-generating country, Uganda owes gratitude to other countries	Refugees are people in humanitarian need
Legal	—	Refugees have rights according to international law and must be protected
Economic	—	Refugees might create further pressure on already scarce food and water resources. But, they can also contribute to economic growth
Security	—	Armed refugees are a security risk

conflicts between refugees and locals are increasingly discussed, this does not lead to a negative portrayal of refugees or doubts about the government's open refugee policy.

The NRM, led by the authoritarian and charismatic Museveni, has ruled Uganda since 1986 and has profoundly influenced the country with all facets of its ideology. Although the NRM's policies have become increasingly pragmatic over time, the core elements of an anti-colonial and Pan-Africanist mentality remain preserved and inform the repertoire that both the government and the opposition party draw on in framing the refugee issue. The fact that Uganda's open refugee policy also brings international funds into the state budget shows how ideas, on the one hand, and economic interests, on the other, can go together.

While in most other country chapters, we have summarized the results for the government and the opposition parties separately, this is not necessary in the case of Uganda, as both camps pursue similar policies and do not differ in the way they frame Uganda's collective identity and the refugees. Although the freedom of speech of opposition parties is severely restricted by the authoritarian rule of the NRM under the leadership of President Museveni, this does not seem to be the primary reason why the opposition agrees with the government's refugee policy. The open-door policy has consensus among Ugandan politicians and also enjoys very broad support from the population, as the results of a survey indicate ([International Rescue Committee 2018](#)). Any sign of conflict in the debate about refugees tends to be between rural regions where the refugees live and urban centers. But even in these conflicts, the fundamental issue is not about admitting refugees, but the distribution of resources and management problems on the ground.

5. Appendix

Table 7.3 Overview of sampled debates in the parliament of Uganda and other political statements

Date	Public forum	Topic	Speaker	Party
July 13, 2011	Parliament of Uganda	Congratulating South Sudan's Independence	Hassan Fungaroo	FDC
			John Nasasira (Government Chief Whip)	NRM
			Henry Okello Oryem (Minister for Internal Affairs)	NRM
April 26, 2012	Parliament of Uganda	National economy, budget planning for development	Tom Aza	NRM

Continued

Table 7.3 *Continued*

Date	Public forum	Topic	Speaker	Party
September 24, 2013	Parliament of Uganda	Issuing IDs to Uganda citizens	Aronda Nyakairima (Minister for Internal Affairs, UPDF Representative)	
			Mathis Mpuuga	Independent
November 13, 2014	Parliament of Uganda	Arrest and deportation of a Rwandese political refugee	Frederick Ruhindi (Deputy Attorney General)	NRM
			Jack Wamanga Wamai	FDC
January 14, 2014	Parliament of Uganda	Operations of the Ugandan army in South Sudan	Chrispus Kiyonga (Minister of Defence)	NRM
			Sam Okuonzi	Independent
			Edward Katumba Wamala (UPDF Representative)	-
			Kassiano Wadri	FDC
			Moses Ali (Second Deputy Prime Minister)	NRM
March 26, 2014	Parliament of Uganda	Boat accident of Congolese refugees in Lake Albert	Hilary Onek (Minister for DPR)	NRM
			Alex Byarugaba	NRM
			Harriet Ntabazi	NRM
			Reagan Okumu	FDC
April 30, 2014	Parliament of Uganda	Refugee influxes from South Sudan	Gilbert Olanya	Independent
			Bitekyerezo Medard	NRM
December 10, 2014	Parliament of Uganda	Arrests of refugees	Musa Ecweru (Minister RDP)	NRM
December 17, 2014	Parliament of Uganda	Kenyan refugees' problems	Nelson Sabila	NRM
July 21, 2015	Parliament of Uganda	Recruitment of immigration officers	James Baba (Minister of State for Internal Affairs, ex officio member)	NRM
July 22, 2015	Parliament of Uganda	Peace and stability in Uganda	Fred Mwesigye	NRM

Date	Public forum	Topic	Speaker	Party
September 3, 2015	Parliament of Uganda	Internal affairs ministerial statement about security	Jesca Ababiku	Independent
July 14, 2016	Parliament of Uganda	Armed conflict in South Sudan	Molly Lanyero	NRM
July 20, 2016	Parliament of Uganda	Q&A with prime minister	Angel Mark Dulu Ruhakana Rugunda (Prime Minister)	NRM NRM
September 20, 2016	Speech at the UN General Assembly	Summit on Refugees	Yoweri Kaguta Museveni (President)	NRM
January 31, 2017		Budget estimates for the next term	Lee Oguzu	FDC
February 14, 2017		Ministerial statement on food security	Isaac Etuka	NRM
February 15, 2017		Q&A with prime minister	Rose Ayaka Ruhakana Rugunda (Prime Minister)	NRM NRM
February 22, 2017	Parliament of Uganda	Q&A with prime minister	Hassan Fungaroo	FDC
February 28, 2017	Parliament of Uganda	Representing Uganda to the East African Legislative Assembly	Jackeline Nassanga Oba	Independent
July 23, 2017	Solidarity summit on refugees in Kampala	Raising funds for refugees and refugee-hosting districts	Yoweri Kaguta Museveni (President)	NRM
February 13, 2018	Parliament of Uganda	Refugees outside of camps	Hassan Fungaroo Rebecca Kadaga Moses Ali (Deputy Prime Minister)	FDC NRM NRM

Continued

Table 7.3 *Continued*

Date	Public forum	Topic	Speaker	Party
February 14, 2018	Parliament of Uganda	Misappropriation of refugee funds by the office of the prime minister	Elijah Okupa	FDC
February 14, 2018	Parliament of Uganda	Bugungu Community Association	Stephen Mukitale	Independent
March 15, 2018	Parliament of Uganda	Motion to investigate the allegations of corruption of refugee programs	Hassan Fungaroo	FDC
			Elijah Okupa	FDC
			Godfrey Onzima	NRM
			Susan Amero	NRM
April 4, 2018	Parliament of Uganda	Committee on Local Government Accounts	Reagan Okumu	Independent
April 11, 2018	Parliament of Uganda	Communication from the chair	Rebecca Kadaga (The Speaker)	NRM
April 12, 2018	Parliament of Uganda	Allegations of sexual violence in institutions of learning in Uganda	Henry Kibalya	NRM
May 16, 2018	Parliament of Uganda	Policy statements and budget estimates on defence and international affairs	Tom Alero	NRM
June 20, 2018	Public statement	World Refugee Day	Ruhakana Rugunda (Prime Minister)	NRM
August 14, 2018	Parliament of Uganda	Administration of oaths	Tom Alero	NRM
January 17, 2019	Parliament of Uganda	Public Accounts Committee's financial report	Jane Aceng (Minister of Health, ex officio member)	NRM
May 23, 2019	Parliament of Uganda	Statement from the Pan-African Parliament, Africa Day	Jacquiline Amongin	NRM

Date	Public forum	Topic	Speaker	Party
July 18, 2019	Parliament of Uganda	68th Anniversary of the UN Refugee Convention	Jacob Oulanyah (The Deputy Speaker)	NRM
August 8, 2019	Parliament of Uganda	Notes from the speakers' meeting of the African Parliaments	Rebecca Kadaga (The Speaker)	NRM
August 8, 2019	Parliament of Uganda	Response to the opposition's oversight visit made on refugee settlements report	Musa Ecweru (Minister of State for Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees)	NRM
July 15, 2020	Parliament of Uganda	A group of refugees' matters brought to the agenda	Lawrence Songa Biyika	NRM
			Hilary Onok (Minister of State for Relief, Disaster Preparedness and Refugees)	NRM
April 21, 2021	Parliament of Uganda	Forestry	Hellen Asamo	NRM
			Jesca Ababiku	NRM
			Godfrey Onzima	NRM
May 4, 2021	Parliament of Uganda	Evictions of Uganda nationals from the areas around the Kyangwali refugee settlement	Patrick Nsamba	NRM
			Betty Aol	FDC
May 10, 2021	Parliament of Uganda	Report of the Committee on Human Rights	Agnes Taaka	NRM
			Johnson Muyanja	NRM
			James Waluswaka	NRM
			Theodore Ssekikubo	NRM
			Geoffrey Macho	NRM
			Margaret Rwabushaija	Independent
			Rebecca Kadaga (The Speaker)	NRM

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Between an anti-Socialist foreign policy and the historical memory of dictatorship

Chile's ambivalent policy toward displaced Venezuelans

1. Introduction

One of the largest displacement crises in the world has been developing in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. As of the end of 2022, more than 6.6 million Venezuelans have been displaced abroad (UNCHR 2023).¹ This exodus has been caused by the country's descent into dictatorship under the Socialist regime of Nicolás Maduro, a severe socioeconomic crisis triggered by years of economic mismanagement, falling oil prices (Venezuela's main source of revenue), and international sanctions (Freier et al. 2022). While Venezuelans' status as "refugees" remains disputed, the UNHCR has repeatedly called on countries in the region to open their borders and provide protection to displaced persons from Venezuela (UNHCR 2018, 2019). According to the UNHCR, displaced Venezuelans fall under the extended refugee definition provided by the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, to which most Latin American states have subscribed, which includes persons who flee a "seriously disturbed public order." Given that the status of displaced Venezuelans as refugees remains disputed, we adopt the term "displaced Venezuelans." Though geographically distant, Chile has been one of the major destination countries for displaced Venezuelans in Latin America due to its comparatively high socioeconomic development and political stability. As of 2022, it hosted around 444,000 Venezuelans, around 2 percent of Chile's total population (Plataforma de Coordinación Interagencial para Refugiados y Migrantes de Venezuela 2023).

This chapter focuses on Chile's response under the right-wing presidency of Sebastián Piñera from 2018 until early 2022. Even though right-wing governments typically take a restrictive stance toward forced migrants (Akkermann 2015; Dancygier & Margalit 2020; Helbling 2014), the Piñera government adopted a more

¹ Figures range from 6.6 million displaced Venezuelans indicated by UNHCR (2023) to more than 7 million refugees and migrants indicated by the Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (Plataforma de Coordinación Interagencial para Refugiados y Migrantes de Venezuela 2023). These divergent numbers are due to the fact that Venezuelans are not easily classified as "refugees" or "migrants."

ambivalent position of conditioned admission.² On the one hand, the government presented itself as an advocate of displaced Venezuelans by introducing the so-called “*visa de responsabilidad democrática*” (“visa of democratic responsibility”), which grants Venezuelan citizens entry to and temporary residence in Chile for a period of up to two years. On the other hand, however, the *visa de responsabilidad democrática* does not grant displaced Venezuelans refugee protection according to international law and remains subject to several conditions, which makes it a rather selective instrument, with the effect of limiting the number of Venezuelans able to come to Chile.³

Not only did the right-wing government deviate from theoretical expectations, but also the left-wing opposition did not fully fit the expectation of adopting a more humanitarian stance toward displaced Venezuelans. In abstract terms, Chile’s left-wing opposition supported a more humanitarian migration policy by emphasizing the human rights of migrants. However, it remained rather silent on the Venezuelan displacement crisis and did not advocate a more welcoming policy, such as granting displaced Venezuelans asylum in Chile. How can we make sense of the government and opposition parties’ ambivalent policy positions?

We argue that to answer this question, we have to examine how the government and the opposition parties defined who “we” and the migrants or refugees (“they”) are. We show that the government’s policy regarding admitting displaced Venezuelans rested on a contradicting definition of Chile’s identity and framing of refugees. On the one hand, Chile was defined as a stable democracy and successful market economy, and in this respect, as an ideological rival of Socialist Venezuela. In principle, this framing implies an openness to people who want to leave Venezuela. On the other hand, the government emphasized Chile’s national sovereignty, a limited inclination to comply with international refugee law, and Chile’s socioeconomic success. This framing implies that displaced Venezuelans should not be treated as refugees according to international law. Instead, the focus should primarily be on those who bring enough human capital to benefit Chile’s economy. Despite the government’s rhetorical commitment to displaced Venezuelans, these interpretations motivated a policy of stronger migration control and selective admission.

The opposition parties’ framing of the “we” and the “others” differed from the government’s but also consisted of contradicting interpretations. In contrast to the government, the left-wing opposition parties were driven by frames that, in principle, encourage a more humanitarian migration policy. They defined Chile as a country committed to international refugee law and respect for human rights and emphasized Chileans’ own history of emigration and exile under the Pinochet dictatorship. However, they criticized the government for giving privileged admission to displaced Venezuelans via an instrument like the *visa de responsabilidad democrática*, because

² Victoria Finn and Sebastián Umpierrez de Reguero (2020) describe it as “inclusive language for exclusive policies.”

³ As we see in more detail later, the government also restricted the entry of Venezuelans to Chile via tourist visas, which had been an important channel of access before. Furthermore, with an increasing number of Venezuelans entering Chile’s northern border by irregular means, the government also emphasized border control measures and the need to return irregular migrants.

they were reluctant to position Chile as an ideological rival of Venezuela, given Chile's politically divisive history. They argued that Piñera's right-wing coalition does not have the right to condemn a Socialist dictatorship because his coalition has been reluctant to acknowledge the criminal character of the right-wing military dictatorship in Chile itself.

The analyses presented in this chapter refer to the policies and discourse under the Piñera presidency, particularly in the years 2018 and 2019. It should be noted that with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, Chile, like many other countries around the world, closed its borders and discontinued issuing the *visa de responsabilidad democrática* to Venezuelans. Piñera was succeeded in early 2022 by Gabriel Boric of the left-wing coalition *Apruebo Dignity* (in Spanish, "Apruebo Dignidad"), formed of non-establishment parties arising from the country's successive student protests.⁴

2. Background of the debate

Migration and asylum policy became an important topic of political debates in Chile only recently (Aninat & Vergara 2019; Rojas Pedemonte & Vicuña Undurraga 2019) because, throughout most of its history, Chile was not a major destination country for migrants and refugees (for a historical overview, see Cano et al. 2009). Instead, Chile was mostly an emigration country, particularly during the military dictatorship under Augusto Pinochet (1973 to 1989), which pushed many Chileans into emigration and exile. The recent debate on admitting displaced Venezuelans coincides with a more general transformation of Chile into a country of immigration, following the country's continuous high economic growth and political stability after re-establishing democracy. To properly understand the debate on admitting displaced Venezuelans, it is necessary to first delve into Chile's recent history of military dictatorship and socioeconomic development.

2.1 Country information

Chile stretches for several thousand kilometers along South America's Pacific coastline, separated from Argentina and Bolivia to the East by the Andes mountain range and from Peru to the North by the Atacama Desert. Despite its geographic isolation, in recent decades, Chile has emerged as an important destination country for migrants and displaced persons from Latin America. This attraction is due to the fact that Chile has turned into one of the most economically developed countries in the region and has maintained a high degree of political stability. According to

⁴ The analysis of the new government's refugee and migration policies is outside the scope of our study. However, it seems that the left-wing Boric government will surprisingly continue the restrictive aspects of the Piñera government's approach, emphasizing the need for stricter border controls and fighting irregular migration. It has adopted the previous government's demands for an "orderly, safe, and regular" migration (Boric 2023, [Ministerio del Interior y Seguridad Pública 2023](#)) but has not announced any measures to admit displaced Venezuelans in Chile.

World Bank estimates, between 1990 and 2022, its GDP per capita grew from around US\$2500 to US\$15,400 (World Bank 2023a). In 2010, Chile became the first South American country to join the OECD. Chile is one of the few Latin American countries with a very high human development index and the highest in the region (0.855 as of 2021) (United Nations Development Program 2023). It has also managed to reduce its levels of social inequality (from a Gini coefficient of 0.57 in 1990 to 0.45 in 2020) (World Bank 2023b), though its inequality remains one of the highest in Latin America.⁵ At the same time, Chile has escaped much of the political volatility affecting its neighbors during the last decades. Since 1990, all presidents have completed their full terms, and power has peacefully alternated between left-wing and right-wing party coalitions. According to the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index, Chile scores 0.76 (Varieties of Democracy 2023), the highest in South America.⁶

This recent political stability and relative economic prosperity presents a significant reversal of the fate the country suffered between 1970 and 1990. Distant from major world politics throughout its history, Chile was suddenly pulled into the vortex of the Cold War in 1970, when Salvador Allende won the presidential elections on a Socialist platform. Over the next three years of his tenure, Chile would experiment with a unique “democratic path to Socialism.” But Allende’s presidency was upended on September 11, 1973, when a military junta—supported by the US government—staged a coup to remove Allende from power and “save” the country from Marxism and alleged political disorder. The junta suspended the Constitution and installed a military dictatorship under General Augusto Pinochet. Under the Pinochet regime, tens of thousands of Chileans, primarily the political left and supporters of Allende, suffered repression and political persecution. According to reports by the Chilean Truth and Reconciliation Commission, more than 3000 people were killed, and around 30,000 suffered torture by state agents (Collins 2010).

Following international pressure, Pinochet was voted out of power by a referendum in 1988, and the country returned to democratic rule in 1990. However, this “return to democracy” was initially “incomplete,” as the political inheritance of the dictatorship was only slowly dismantled (Garretón & Garretón 2010), and prosecution of human rights violations remained limited (Collins 2010).⁷ The dictatorship and its legacy continued to divide Chilean society and its political landscape. Particularly relevant for our analysis is the fact that for many years, the Chilean party system reflected a divide between parties to the right that had supported a continuation of Pinochet’s rule in the referendum and those to the left that had opposed it (Alemán & Saeigh 2007; Bonilla et al. 2011). As we show in our analysis, this divide and the

⁵ A fact that in 2019 led to an unprecedented social upheaval in Chile, which triggered a constitutional reform process.

⁶ However, evidence suggests a dramatic decline in citizen trust in Chile’s political elite (Bargsted & Somma 2016).

⁷ Chile continues to be governed by a Constitution enacted in 1980, which, prior to recently undertaken reforms, preserved authoritarian elements, such as a significant autonomy for the military and a voting system that implicitly ensured disproportional representation of right-wing parties that had supported Pinochet. Pinochet himself remained commander in chief of the military until 1998 and lifetime Senator until his political immunity was lifted in 2000. However, he was never convicted for his crimes. Currently, there are efforts to replace the Constitution.

corresponding collective memories of the dictatorship continued to shape debates on the Venezuelan displacement crisis.

Chile's turbulent history is also reflected in its migration figures. The political violence of the military dictatorship spurred a massive movement of emigration and exile from Chile. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission speaks of around 250,000 political exiles (Collins 2010); other estimates suggest that around 500,000 people left the country (Cano et al. 2009: 15, 17; Sznajder & Roninger 2009: 233). One of the most important destinations was Venezuela—a fact frequently alluded to in the debates about Venezuelan displacement—followed by the US and Europe. Some of the country's leading political figures from the left suffered this fate of exile, such as former President Michelle Bachelet, who was tortured by Pinochet's secret police and fled to the German Democratic Republic. As our analysis shows, the experience of emigration and exile shared by so many Chileans played a significant role in the political debate on the Venezuelan displacement crisis.

Until 2020, Chile's migration law continued to be based on a decree dating back to 1975 and the military dictatorship. After the return to democracy in 1990, several reform efforts were undertaken to bring Chile's legal framework on migration and asylum in line with international standards. Pressures to reform Chile's migration law further mounted in recent years as Chile began to attract a significant number of migrants, mainly from other countries in Latin America, due to its economic prosperity and political stability. In the year 2000, only 1 percent of Chile's population were foreign citizens, yet by 2021, the number of international migrants had increased to almost 1.5 million, nearly 8 percent of the resident population (Servicio Nacional de Migraciones 2023).⁸ The largest group of foreign residents in Chile is displaced persons from Venezuela (around 30 percent), followed by migrants from Peru (17 percent) and Haiti (12 percent). Thus, as we show next, the debate on admitting displaced Venezuelans is embedded in a more general debate on how to deal with Chile's new reality as a country of immigration.

2.2 Critical discourse moments: The Venezuelan displacement crisis and Chile's migration law reform

The political debate on admitting displaced Venezuelans in Chile has developed mainly since 2018 due to the rising inflows of Venezuelans following the dramatic

⁸ Cano et al. (2009: 12) estimate that historically, the share of immigrants in Chile was mostly around 1 percent to 2 percent and never exceeded 4 percent of the total population. As a former colony of the Spanish Empire, Chile also used to attract a significant share of European migrants. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century, the Chilean government engaged in a more targeted effort to attract immigration from Western Europe (for example, from Germany, Italy, and Switzerland) in order to colonize its Southern territories (still facing contestation by indigenous groups like the Mapuche) and to promote agricultural and industrial production. This selective immigration policy was undergirded by the belief that European migrants were racially superior and would contribute to economic development and a biological "improvement" of the Chilean people. A similarly ethnically selective immigration policy was also practiced in other Latin American states (FitzGerald 2013).

deterioration of socioeconomic conditions and political instability in that country. But this debate does not occur in isolation. It is also embedded in a larger debate on the 2021 reform of Chile's migration law, which was unchanged from the military dictatorship and was no longer considered to be adequate to deal with the rising number of migrants not only from Venezuela but from other countries as well. We describe both critical discourse moments in turn.

The Venezuelan displacement crisis and the “visa de responsabilidad democrática”

Venezuela has been under a self-designated Socialist government since 1999 when former military officer Hugo Chávez was elected president on a platform of following a path toward a “Socialism of the 21st century,” which blended diverse ideological elements from Socialism, “Bolivarianism” (the idea of Latin American unity), anti-Americanism, and a strongly populist style. His election spearheaded the so-called “pink tide” of left-leaning governments in Latin America in the first decade of the 2000s, with Chávez emerging as the regional icon of the radical left (to some extent, taking over this role from Cuba's Fidel Castro).

Already under Chávez, but more so under his successor, Nicolás Maduro, elected after Chávez died in 2013, Venezuela began to descend into a political and socioeconomic crisis. On the one hand, the government slowly undermined democracy and curtailed basic freedoms. Following a contested presidential election in 2018, which saw Nicolás Maduro re-elected, the oppositional National Assembly appointed Juan Guaidó as interim president.⁹ In consequence, most countries in Latin America, North America, and Europe no longer recognized Maduro as the legitimate president, even though he continued to have de facto control over the government. At the time of writing, the conflict between Maduro and the opposition remains unresolved but has de-escalated somewhat since the Guaidó interim government was dissolved in 2022.

On the other hand, the country has descended into a severe socioeconomic crisis, mainly due to economic mismanagement, falling oil prices (Venezuela's main source of revenue), and international sanctions against the regime. Once one of the most prosperous countries in Latin America due to its rich oil reserves, Venezuela's GDP per capita is estimated to have dropped from a high of US\$12,688 in 2012 to a low of US\$1567 in 2020, with a slight recovery since then (Statista 2023a).¹⁰ The poverty rate has risen sharply (to more than 90 percent as of 2021) (Statista 2023c), inflation has skyrocketed (to a peak of more than 65,000 percent in 2018) (Statista 2022b), and Venezuelans suffer from food scarcity and lack of access to basic services, including healthcare.¹¹ Additionally, Venezuela has become one of the most dangerous countries in the world, with high rates of crime and homicide.

⁹ For a concise timeline of the events in Venezuela, see Cohen (2019).

¹⁰ Figures are estimates because no official data is available.

¹¹ For an assessment of the situation in Venezuela, see the human rights report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR 2021).

In consequence, as of 2022, at least 6.6 million Venezuelans are displaced (UNHCR 2023), while some estimates speak of more than 7 million Venezuelans who have left the country (Plataforma de Coordinación Interagencial para Refugiados y Migrantes de Venezuela 2023). As in similar refugee crises elsewhere, most displaced Venezuelans directly cross the border and seek access to neighboring Colombia, which at the time of writing hosts around 2.5 million Venezuelans. Colombia is followed by Peru, Ecuador, and Chile as the major destination countries in Latin America. Despite calls by the UNHCR to extend refugee protection to displaced Venezuelans under the Cartagena Declaration,¹² the regional response to the displacement crisis has remained uneven (for an overview, see Selee & Bolter 2020). So far, only Brazil and Mexico—countries facing lower numbers of displaced Venezuelans—recognize displaced Venezuelans as refugees, according to the Cartagena Declaration. Colombia has decided to extend temporary protection, while other countries have implemented ad hoc measures such as introducing humanitarian visas. The reasons given are that extending refugee protection to displaced Venezuelans would overburden national asylum systems and create an additional pull effect.

In our analysis, we consider the discourse around two events. First, in early 2018, the recently elected Chilean government under Sebastián Piñera decided to introduce the so-called “visa de responsabilidad democrática” to regulate the rising inflow of Venezuelans into the country. One can describe this as a policy of “conditioned admission.” On the one hand, this is a humanitarian visa extended to Venezuelan citizens, which grants them access to temporary residence in Chile for up to two years.¹³ On the other hand, Venezuelans must apply for this visa in Chilean consulates abroad, present a passport, a clean criminal record, and pay a small fee (Chile Atiende 2021). These requirements make it a rather selective instrument. Between its introduction in 2018 and 2020, 227,000 Venezuelans applied for this visa, but it was granted to only around 60,000 applicants (SJM 2021). This visa was suspended in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic in late 2020.

Then, in July 2019, another intense controversy over admitting displaced Venezuelans was triggered by a crisis on Chile's northern border with Peru. Around one year after the visa de responsabilidad democrática was introduced, the number of displaced Venezuelans arriving in Chile continued to rise. To stem this inflow—and in reaction to a similar measure by Peru—the Chilean government decided to add the requirement that Venezuelan citizens seeking to travel to Chile as tourists would have to apply for a tourist visa in a Chilean consulate in Venezuela.¹⁴ No other citizens from

¹² According to the UNHCR, Venezuelan migrants fall under the extended refugee definition provided by the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, to which most Latin American states have subscribed. The Cartagena Declaration considers not only those persons as refugees who are politically persecuted but, more generally, also “persons who have fled their country because their lives, security or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order” (UNHCR 1984). The UNHCR considers particularly the latter—a “seriously disturbed public order”—to apply to the case of Venezuela.

¹³ This visa contrasts with a measure regarding migrants from Haiti declared at the same time. Haitians merely receive “visas de reunificación familiar” (visas for family members of Haitians regularly residing in Chile). The number of visas is restricted to 10,000 per year.

¹⁴ It costs US\$50 and requires the presentation of a return ticket.

Latin American countries require such visas to enter Chile. With this requirement, the government reduced the high number of Venezuelans hoping to apply for a residence permit once they entered the country on a tourist visa. In the government's view, the tourist visa workaround enabled fraud and increased irregular migration. This new restriction left hundreds of Venezuelan migrants stranded at Chile's border with Peru (at the "Chacalluta" border post). These people planned to enter Chile on foot and suddenly could no longer enter without the required visa. Neither could they easily return to Venezuela. Over the next years, the Piñera government responded to increasing irregular entries through Chile's northern borders with heightened border control measures and eventually declared a state of exception in 2022.

Migration law reform

As mentioned, the debate in Chile on admitting displaced Venezuelans coincided with a debate on a major reform of Chile's migration law (Decreto Ley 1.094 from 1975), which dated back to the military dictatorship and was no longer seen as adequate to deal with the rising number of migrants coming to Chile and not in line with Chile's commitments in terms of international law and human rights (see, e.g., [Aninat & Sierra 2019](#)). While the Venezuelan displacement crisis was not at the center of this debate, it exerted additional pressure to reform Chile's legal framework, given that Venezuelans constitute the largest migrant group in Chile. One can, therefore, assume that the reform debate was carried out with the Venezuelan displacement crisis in mind, which is why we included it in our analysis.

The issue of migration policy reform emerged as a hot topic during the 2017 electoral campaign, which saw Piñera re-elected on a platform of bringing "order" to Chile's migration policy and reducing irregular migration ([Stefoni & Brito 2019](#)). Right after assuming office in 2018, Piñera introduced a reform bill to Congress. The main goal of the reform was—in the words of the government—to "put the house in order" and promote a "safe, orderly, and regular" migration to Chile. In other words, they aimed to regulate immigration, close legal loopholes, and enhance migrants' rights (Sebastián Piñera, RN, April 9, 2018). The more controversial aspects of the bill included measures to expedite expulsions and enhance border control, for example, by prohibiting a change in migratory status once within the country, thereby preventing people from entering Chile as tourists and thereafter applying for temporary residence.¹⁵ The political opposition strongly disputed enhancing border controls during the parliamentary debate on the bill. Nevertheless, it became law in 2021.

It should be noted that the parliamentary debate on migration reform was also punctuated by an international event. In December 2018, the Piñera government decided not to sign the UN Global Compact for Migration, a nonbinding international agreement under the auspices of the UN to promote "safe, orderly, and

¹⁵ Other elements of the reform included centralizing competencies and creating a proper government authority in matters of migration policy, reformulating and streamlining migratory categories that reflect the changing nature of migration flows to Chile, and defining the rights and obligations of migrants, strengthening their rights regarding access to healthcare, education, and other basic services.

regular” migration. Chile was just one of a few countries that did not sign the Compact, including the US, Israel, Hungary, and Australia. The government declared that the Compact would endanger Chile’s national sovereignty in matters of migration policy, particularly because it reduces the ability to control national borders and allegedly blurs the distinction between regular and irregular migration (Sebastián Piñera, RN, August, 15 2018). This decision was heavily criticized by the Chilean opposition as a break with the country’s commitment to international law and multilateralism.

2.3 Description of the forum, political actors, and debates

Much like in the other chapters, we mainly focus on the analysis of debates in the forum of the parliament. The Chilean National Congress is a bicameral body consisting of a Chamber of Deputies (155 Deputies) and a Senate (forty-three Senators), equally involved in lawmaking. Therefore, we include debates in both chambers in our analysis. However, some statements on migration policy, admitting displaced Venezuelans, and the visa de responsabilidad democrática were made outside of the parliamentary forum, for example, in the mass media, such as in response to the Chacalluta border crisis, or in the form of government declarations. We included some of these statements to complement our analysis.

Our analysis focuses on debates during the electoral cycle from 2017 to 2021.¹⁶ With changing compositions, a center-right and a center-left bloc has dominated elections since Chile’s return to democracy. In the 2017 elections, businessman and former President Sebastián Piñera from the center-right National Renewal (in Spanish, “Renovación Nacional,” abbreviated as RN) was elected president, succeeding Michelle Bachelet from the Socialist Party (in Spanish, “Partido Socialista,” abbreviated as PS). In Congress, the government was supported by the conservative right-wing coalition “Let’s Go Chile” (in Spanish, “Chile Vamos”) of the RN, Independent Democratic Union (in Spanish, “Unión Demócrata Independiente,” abbreviated as UDI), and Political Evolution (in Spanish, “Evolución Política,” abbreviated as Evópoli). Within Chile’s political spectrum, these parties represent the economically liberal and socially conservative pole (Valenzuela et al. 2018). The main opposition was the center-left coalition “The Power of the Majority” (in Spanish, “La Fuerza de la Mayoría”), consisting of the PS, Party for Democracy (in Spanish, “Partido por la Democracia,” abbreviated as PPD), Radical Party of Chile (in Spanish, “Partido Radical de Chile,” abbreviated as PR), and Communist Party of Chile (in Spanish, “Partido Comunista de Chile,” abbreviated as PC). Other party coalitions were the centrist Christian Democrat “Democratic Convergence” (in Spanish, “Convergencia Democrática”) and the new radical left “Broad Front” (in Spanish,

¹⁶ In Chile, presidential and parliamentary elections take place at the same time.

“Frente Amplio”).¹⁷ It should be noted that during the ensuing 2021 elections, the established center-left and center-right party blocs lost their previous dominance due to the unexpected outcome that sent presidential candidates from the new left coalition (Broad Front with Gabriel Boric) and the radical right (José Antonio Kast) into a run-off election. Boric won the presidential election but had to rely on the support of the “old” center-left in Congress.

The main focus of our analysis is statements and speeches on admitting displaced Venezuelans and the *visa de responsabilidad democrática* (see appendix to this chapter for an overview of sampled debates). However, there was no session in parliament dedicated exclusively to these issues. Rather, these issues were raised in the context of the following debates. The first is the debate on the reform of Chile’s migration law described previously. We analyzed public speeches delivered by both Michelle Bachelet and Sebastián Piñera announcing their respective migration reform proposals to the public. In the context of his speech, Piñera also announced the *visa de responsabilidad democrática* via decree. We examined the ensuing plenary debates on the government’s migration bill (Boletín 8970–06) in the Chamber of Deputies (January 2019) and the Senate (August 2019). Concluding these debates, a majority of both the government and opposition parties approved legislating on the reform proposal. The second parliamentary debate during which the issue of admitting displaced Venezuelans was raised was in the Chamber of Deputies on a resolution proposal brought by the government coalition to condemn the regime in Venezuela and its human rights abuses (May 2018). Most members of The Power of the Majority and other leftist parties either abstained or voted against this resolution (for reasons we explain later). Despite this, it was approved by a majority vote.

Finally, to validate our interpretations, we conducted expert interviews with seven legislative advisors from the RN government and the main political parties represented in parliament (PC, PDC, PPD, PS, RD, and UDI). We interviewed them on the position and framing of their respective parties on migration and refugee policy in general and the Venezuelan displacement crisis in particular.

In the following sections, we first present the position of the government of Sebastián Piñera and representatives of the right-wing bloc Let’s Go Chile in Congress. Then, we move on to the position of the representatives of left and center-left parties within The Power of the Majority alliance. The positions of the individual parties within both blocs are not always identical. However, in the interest of parsimony, we focus on their general stance and refrain from distinguishing between party positions, except where their positions deviate substantially from others in their bloc. Furthermore, we do not additionally present the position and framing of the Democratic Convergence and the Broad Front (currently in power as part of the Approve Dignity coalition) because they do not introduce significantly different frames on

¹⁷ Smaller coalitions represented in the Chamber of Deputies but without representation in the Senate are “For All Chile” (in Spanish, “Por Todo Chile”) and “Green and Regionalist Coalition” (in Spanish, “Coalición Regionalista Verde”). We do not consider them in our analysis.

the Venezuelan displacement crisis than used by the two main party coalitions at the time of our study.

3. The positioning and framing of the Let's Go Chile government coalition

3.1 Positioning: An ambivalent admission policy

The government of Sebastián Piñera—supported by the parties of his right-wing coalition Let's Go Chile in Congress—pursued an ambivalent policy toward displaced Venezuelans, which can be characterized as a policy of “conditioned admission.” On the one hand, in a multitude of national and international venues, Piñera presented himself as an advocate of the oppressed Venezuelan people and underscored Chile's commitment to open its borders to them:

We know that we already have more than 4.5 million refugees and migrants, but that number will probably double if the situation continues as it is now. In the case of Chile, we have received more than 450,000 migrants, which corresponds to 2% of our population. If we compare it to the [United] States, it would be equivalent to 6 million Venezuelans. But we are happy to receive them because that is a way to help. (Piñera 2019)

Accordingly, just after assuming the presidency in 2018, Piñera announced the establishment of the “visa de responsabilidad democrática,” which grants Venezuelan citizens access to and temporary residence in Chile for a period of up to two years. In his announcement, Piñera suggests that Chile has a special obligation to admit displaced Venezuelans because of the democratic breakdown in Venezuela and Chile's own history: “Taking into consideration the serious democratic crisis that currently affects Venezuela, and recalling the humanitarian policy that Venezuela had, which welcomed many Chileans in times when they needed it and who sought refuge at its borders” (Sebastián Piñera, RN, April 9, 2018).

On the other hand, however, the government addressed admitting displaced Venezuelans as a matter of migration policy and not of refugee policy, as the visa de responsabilidad democrática does not grant protection according to international law. Its acquisition is subject to several conditions described previously that make it a selective instrument (see also Finn & Umpierrez de Reguero 2020). Furthermore, one year after the introduction of the visa in 2019, the government tightened entry requirements for all tourist travel from Venezuela¹⁸ and reinforced border controls at Chile's northern border to prevent the entry of irregular migrants.

¹⁸ By requiring a visa from a Chilean consulate abroad, without which entry to Chile is prohibited, border control is effectively “externalized” (Mau et al. 2008; Shachar 2009). This prerequisite reduces the number of Venezuelans that can reach the Chilean border in the first place and already siphons off those who are eligible to stay in Chile from those who are not and threaten to stay in irregular conditions.

To understand this policy of conditioned admission, we have to examine the government's discourse on migration more generally and its stance toward displaced Venezuelans in particular.

3.2 Who are “we”? A sovereign socioeconomically successful nation and systemic rival of Venezuela

The Piñera government's migration policy was motivated by the desire to—in its own words—“put the house in order,” which is based first and foremost on a *legal* framing of the Chilean “we.” By comparing Chile to a “house,” the government emphasizes that Chile is a sovereign country with the right to control its borders and decide who enters its territory. The emphasis on national sovereignty conversely means that international refugee law is interpreted as a limitation of state sovereignty. This reasoning is precisely why Piñera refused to sign the UN Global Compact for Migration:

However, as President of Chile, and in order to protect the interest of Chile and all my compatriots, I cannot support a text that, for the aforementioned reasons and after a deep and exhaustive analysis, I consider to be harmful and does not protect the interest of Chile, encourages and focuses on irregular migration, facilitates the promotion of rights that are not recognized, establishes new duties for the State of Chile, makes it difficult to safeguard our borders and limits our sovereign capacity to make decisions on matters of migration matters in the best interest of all Chileans. (Sebastián Piñera, RN, December 15, 2018)

The metaphor of the house also means that Chileans, as the owners of the house, define the rules and how to behave inside the house. Migrants have to abide by Chile's national laws if they want to be admitted, much like guests invited to one's house are expected to respect the house rules. In the view of the Let's Go Chile coalition, the previous left-wing government has compromised the rule of law in Chile by being too lenient with the many migrants who have entered the country in irregular conditions and broken its laws. Consequently, the government's slogan to “put the house in order” means strengthening Chile's capacity for border control and distinguishing between those migrants who come to Chile with “honest” intentions and want to contribute and those who break the law, for example, by coming to Chile on irregular terms.

This legal self-definition as a sovereign country is complemented by a definition of the “we” in *economic* terms as a socioeconomically highly successful country, putting it on par with the more advanced economies in the world. In the view of the right-wing coalition, Chile's process of modernization and socioeconomic development in recent decades has turned the country into a “land of opportunities,” a development in which the right-wing coalition expresses considerable pride. Consequently, Chile has become an attractive destination for migrants from other Latin American countries “who have come to our country to fulfill their dreams of a better

life” (Sebastián Piñera, RN, April 9, 2018). The fact that so many migrants choose Chile as a destination is interpreted as clear evidence of the country's socioeconomic achievements.

Accordingly, as long as they can “contribute” to Chile's further development with their efforts and skills, migrants are included in this definition of the “we,” while those who do not contribute are excluded. This interpretation holds regardless of where migrants come from; in fact, Piñera and his right-wing coalition do not tend to define Chile in culturally exclusive terms and draw boundaries against cultural “others.” This aspect distinguishes Piñera's framing from that of other right-wing politicians, who frequently draw cultural boundaries against immigrants by describing them as incompatible with the national culture. Instead, Piñera defines Chile in multicultural terms as a “country of immigration,” which is shaped by the contributions of immigrants from countries all around the world. In Piñera's own words:

Chile has been, is, and will continue to be an open and welcoming country towards immigration. In fact, one of the main assets of our country is its diversity, contributed by our original peoples and by those who—throughout our history—have come to Chile in search of a better life: the Spanish, European, Palestinian migrations and that of many of our brother countries in Latin America. And therefore, this is how our wonderful nation was formed, with all those who assumed it as a second homeland. Our country belongs to all of us. We have to take care of it together and we have to dream it and build it together. (Sebastián Piñera, RN, April 9, 2018)

While these definitions of the “we” shape the government and right-wing coalition's more restrictive stance toward migration more generally, the Venezuelan displacement crisis, in particular, triggers another dimension of Chile's self-definition—its *international* position, which entails support for Venezuelans in particular. In the understanding of the Piñera government and his coalition, Chile's democratic development and political stability on the one hand and its socioeconomic success on the other have turned it into a role model in Latin America. Given that this success is mainly based on the principles of liberal democracy and a free market economy, Chile is positioned as an ideological rival of other countries in Latin America who have followed a Socialist path. The principal representative of this rivalry is Venezuela under the presidencies of Chávez and Maduro, who have proclaimed a “Socialism of the 21st century.”¹⁹ They have turned a once prosperous and democratic Venezuela into a dictatorship and caused a severe socioeconomic crisis, pushing its citizens

¹⁹ Indeed, Piñera positioned himself as a vocal critic of the Maduro regime. One of the most symbolically charged examples of this positioning was Piñera's participation in the “Venezuela Aid Live” concert in February 2019 in Cúcuta, a Colombian town at the Venezuelan border. This concert with some of Latin America's most well-known musicians aimed to raise money and pressure Maduro to open the borders for humanitarian aid. Piñera attended along with Guaidó and right-wing Colombian president Iván Duque, calling for an end to the Maduro dictatorship and pledging Chile's support to the Venezuelan people. Despite criticism from the opposition for his unilateral approach, Piñera would reiterate this message during his presidency.

abroad. The fact that so many Venezuelans vote with their feet and choose to migrate to Chile evidences the very superiority of the Chilean model. Senator José Miguel Durana from the right-wing UDI very clearly expresses this view:

On the one hand, we have the drama that the Venezuelan people are facing and that practically leads its inhabitants to flee from hunger, misery, and the risk to their lives into which the illegal and immoral government of Nicolás Maduro has plunged them and, on the other, there are the conditions of development, stability and, consequently, of hope that our nation offers. (José Miguel Durana, UDI, August 13, 2018)

Consequently, Piñera's government suggests that because Chile is positioned as a regional role model and ideological rival to Venezuela, it has to assume a special commitment to admit those who are escaping its Socialist regime.

Additionally, according to the government, there is another reason that Chile should assume a leading regional role in opposing the Maduro regime and aiding displaced Venezuelans, which goes back to Chile's troubled history. Much like Venezuela is now, Chile was once under a dictatorship that pushed many Chileans abroad, while Venezuela was a prosperous country with a stable democracy that received many of them. According to Piñera, this generates an obligation of reciprocity between Chile and Venezuela: "Remembering the humanitarian policy that Venezuela had, which welcomed many Chileans in times when they needed it and who sought refuge at its borders" (Sebastián Piñera, RN, April 9, 2018).

With this appeal to reciprocity, Piñera implicitly equates the Maduro regime with the Pinochet dictatorship. It can be argued that this comparison may not (only) have the function of mobilizing support for admitting displaced Venezuelans but also send an implicit message to the left-wing opposition in Chile. The comparison suggests that any Socialist regime can become a dictatorship, much like Pinochet's, and commit human rights violations. It pressures left-wing parties into condemning the Socialist Maduro regime as much as they have condemned Pinochet unless they want to be accused of a moral double standard. This intention becomes evident in the following statement from a deputy of UDI, a party that supported the continuation of Pinochet's rule in the 1988 referendum:

Precisely when I have had differences with members of my party, it has been because of that, because I condemn the dictatorship in Chile and the human rights violations that occurred. However, it is sad to see that those who fought against the dictatorship in Chile and who went to Venezuela—today turn their backs and spit in the face of those who are asking for help. Not only a right-wing deputy says it, but millions of people say it. (Jaime Bellolio, UDI, May 29, 2018)

Indeed, as we see below, this political message contained in the government's policy toward the Venezuelan displacement crisis is what the opposition criticized most.

3.3 Who are “they”? Displaced Venezuelans and migrants of special concern

The emphasis on national sovereignty and skepticism about international refugee law leads President Piñera and his government to avoid defining displaced Venezuelans in *legal* terms as “refugees.” Rather, they define them as “migrants,” meaning they do not have a principled right to enter Chile. Further, as migrants, they fall under the government’s distinction between those migrants who come to Chile with honest intentions, that is, to work, and those who come on irregular terms and break the country’s laws. Particular care must be taken to exclude the latter. This legal distinction between “regular” and “irregular” migration also tends to bleed into a *security* frame, as Piñera refers to potential criminals, drug, and human traffickers among the migrants, which can potentially harm Chileans:

This means that Chile has a policy of open doors and arms to welcome those migrants who come to our country to start a new and better life, to respect our laws—starting with the Migration Law—to integrate into our society, and to contribute to the development of Chile. However, those who try to enter our country to cause us harm, such as criminal gangs, organized crime, drug traffickers, or human trafficking, will find a closed-door policy. (Sebastián Piñera, RN, April 9, 2018)

Following their emphasis on the economic aspects of who “we” are, the government and the right-wing coalition also define migrants, including displaced Venezuelans, in *economic* terms. They view them as a form of “human capital” who can contribute to Chile’s development with their skills and hard work—no matter their cultural background. Accordingly, the government and right-wing coalition distinguish between migrants who are useful for Chile and those who are not and, therefore, should not be admitted. This view is expressed in the clearest manner by the following quote from Deputy René García of the RN: “Let come those who want. No one can discriminate based on color or the place where they come from. It doesn’t matter. But that they be good people, that they be people who come to contribute, and that they be people that the country feels pleased to have” (René Manuel García, RN, January 16, 2019).

While they are not defined as “refugees” or “asylum seekers” according to international law, displaced Venezuelans are nevertheless singled out as a group of migrants that is of special concern to the government. This positioning becomes evident from the name given to the special visa they are granted: “visa de responsabilidad democrática.” In line with the *international relations* frame, displaced Venezuelans are not only interpreted as people in need but, more specifically, as victims of a Socialist dictatorship that is committing human rights violations and has severely mismanaged the economy, thus creating a humanitarian crisis. The fact that Venezuelans choose to come to Chile is interpreted as proof of the superiority of the Chilean model with its stable democracy and better socioeconomic conditions. This view is most clearly expressed in the following quote from a UDI deputy:

Welcome to the 280,000 Venezuelans who migrated to Chile, escaping from the Socialism of the 21st century. How important it is to say and think about why there are so many people who want to come to Chile, especially from rich countries like Venezuela, where people migrated to 20 years ago and today, they come here. Welcome those who escape from the Socialism of the 21st century. (Juan Antonio Coloma, UDI, January 16, 2019)

Furthermore, as already mentioned, displaced Venezuelans are implicitly equated with those Chileans whom Pinochet forced into exile during his dictatorship and who often emigrated to Venezuela. Hence, in an act of reciprocity, it is suggested that Chile has a special obligation to grant admission to them now that they are escaping a dictatorship: “Taking into consideration the serious democratic crisis that currently affects Venezuela and recalling the humanitarian policy that Venezuela had, which welcomed many Chileans in times when they needed it and who sought refuge at its borders” (Sebastián Piñera, RN, April 9, 2018).

In sum, it is against the background of these competing definitions of the “we” and the “others” that the government’s ambivalent policy of “conditioned admission” of displaced Venezuelans can be better understood. On the one hand, the migration policy of the Piñera government was based on an understanding of Chile as a sovereign nation with full authority over its borders and as a socioeconomically successful country. Accordingly, displaced Venezuelans were treated as “migrants” and not “refugees” under international law. Only those migrants who respect the country’s laws and contribute to its socioeconomic development should be able to enter Chile. On the other hand, the fact that Chile is a liberal democracy and free-market economy positions it as an ideological rival to Socialist Venezuela. Accordingly, it has a special duty to show solidarity with those Venezuelans who are escaping the Maduro regime and are looking for a better life abroad. By granting *visa de responsabilidad democrática*, Chile honors this obligation, but under the conditions set by Chile’s broader migration policy.

4. The positioning and framing of The Power of the Majority left-wing opposition

4.1 Positioning: Avoiding a clear stance on displaced Venezuelans

During the tenure of President Piñera, the main opposition was formed by an array of political parties from the center-left to the more radical left called The Power of the Majority. In principle, and in contrast to the government, they advocated an open and human rights-oriented approach. Their position becomes evident through a variety of amendments its representatives have tried to introduce to the government’s migration bill in the course of legislative proceedings. For example, they called for including the principle of non-refoulement in the bill, protested the government’s

refusal to sign the UN Migration Compact, or contested the government's intention of abolishing the possibility for migrants to enter Chile on a tourist visa and then apply for temporary residence (which the government framed as a "dishonest" entry into the country).

Surprisingly, however—and contrary to the expectations for left-leaning parties—they did not take a clear stance on the Venezuelan displacement crisis and stayed rather silent on the issue without proposing an alternative reception policy.²⁰ They mostly limited themselves to criticizing the *visa de responsabilidad democrática* for its ambivalent character. Some left-wing representatives even criticized the privileged treatment that the government extended to displaced Venezuelans in comparison to another vulnerable group of migrants, namely those coming from Haiti: While Venezuelans can apply for the *visa de responsabilidad democrática*, the government tightened entry requirements for Haitians.²¹

This [the problem with the tightening of visa requirements for Haitians] is deepened due to the distinctive treatment that is given to the Venezuelan population, where the government grants greater facilities for their entry through the creation of a special democratic responsibility visa that allows them to work in Chile. (Allende 2018)

How can we make sense of this ambivalent and indeterminate position of The Power of the Majority on admitting displaced Venezuelans? As with the government, the ambivalent attitude is based on a partly contradictory understanding of the "we" and the "others."

4.2 Who are "we"? Committed to human rights with an ambivalent relationship toward a Socialist regime

First, much like the government, the left-wing opposition draws on a *legal* definition of who "we" are, but in contrast to the government, it emphasizes Chile's commitment to international law and human rights instead of national sovereignty. This framing is backed by the left-leaning parties' reading of Chile's history, in particular, the military dictatorship under Augusto Pinochet. As we have discussed, the regime killed thousands of opponents, committed massive human rights violations, and pushed as many as half a million Chileans abroad, primarily from the Chilean left. Though the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has documented the crimes committed, the wounds of the dictatorship have not yet fully healed. Many left-wing

²⁰ Apart from possible reasons about ideology explored in the next sections, this silence could have two structural reasons. First, the opposition was not a coherent bloc but an array of political parties with somewhat different ideological orientations. Second, it could be surmised that it has to do with Chile's presidential system. Piñera could decree the *visa de responsabilidad democrática* without having to go through the parliament (see Finn & Umpierrez de Reguero 2020).

²¹ In fact, some left-wing Members of Parliament went before the Constitutional Court to contest this measure.

politicians—some directly affected—emphasize this collective memory of dictatorship and human rights violations in their definition of who “we” are. In the words of former President Michelle Bachelet, the experience of their own vulnerability has made Chileans especially aware of the importance of respecting human rights, including those of migrants: “And recognizing in others what, for Chileans, has become, due to its history, an unwavering principle: that every person is a bearer of human rights” (Michelle Bachelet, PS, August 21, 2017).

Furthermore, in the view of *The Power of the Majority*, Chile’s history not only commits Chileans to protecting human rights but also contains a *moral* dimension. Many Chileans, especially from the left, have experienced emigration and exile following Pinochet’s military coup. Hence, they proclaim to know from their own experience what it means to be a migrant or a refugee and how important it is to receive admission and fair treatment in another country. For example, Isabel Allende—the daughter of the former Socialist President Salvador Allende—implicitly draws on her personal history of exile in Mexico following the coup that caused her father’s death:

I think that we Chileans have also seen how we have been received, along with a very significant number of people—even greater than those we have received in Chile—in different epochs, at different times, and under different circumstances. For those of us who have experienced the fact of having to live abroad, wow, how is it appreciated when the doors are opened, when one receives equal treatment, when rights are respected, when conditions are created. (Isabel Allende, PS, August 13, 2019)

For many left-wing representatives, this experience creates a moral obligation to receive migrants and refugees in Chile with open arms.

Additionally, *The Power of the Majority* draws on a *cultural* self-definition by defining Chile as a multicultural country of immigration open to migrants and refugees from around the world. In contrast to the government, they not only emphasize migrants’ contributions to Chile’s socioeconomic development—even though they share the government’s pride in Chile’s recent socioeconomic achievements—they also emphasize how Chile has developed due to the cultural contributions of migrants and refugees. Of particular importance seems to be the collective memory of the “SS Winnipeg.” This cargo ship was organized in 1939 by the Chilean poet and then-Consul to France, Pablo Neruda, to transport around 2000 Spanish Republicans fleeing the victory of Fascist General Francisco Franco ([Memoria Chilena 2018](#)). Among them were intellectuals and artists who subsequently settled in Chile. Their positive contributions to Chile’s cultural development are frequently emphasized to point out how Chile has been shaped by immigration:

Mr. President, in a few more weeks, we will commemorate the eightieth anniversary of the arrival of the Winnipeg. Eight decades ago, another Chile welcomed a group of refugees with open arms who ended up repaying the support that our

country gave them. In dark times of our history, it was other nations that received thousands of Chilean men and women who sought help to protect their lives. Let's not lose that essence. We are a small country that has grown and will continue to grow based on the contribution of different cultures. There is no room in Chile for more improvisations in immigration matters. More scenes like the ones in Winnipeg, fewer scenes like the ones in Chacalluta. (Jaime Quintana, PS, August 13, 2019)

However, while The Power of the Majority defines Chile, in principle, as a country committed to human rights and open to migrants and refugees, surprisingly, it does not take a clear stance regarding the Venezuelan displacement crisis. This ambivalence is because they reject following the government in positioning Chile in *international* terms as a leader of the regional opposition to Socialist Venezuela. Their reluctance must be understood against the background of Chile's politically divisive history. As we have seen, after the return to democracy, it took several years before the right-wing parties that had supported a continuation of Pinochet's rule in the 1988 referendum began to acknowledge its dictatorial character and the human rights violations it committed. Consequently, during the debates on the Venezuelan crisis, many left-wing representatives argue that the governing right-wing coalition does not have the moral authority to present itself as a defender of democracy and human rights and to condemn the Maduro regime. This reluctance is expressed in the following quote:

I value, in all senses of the word, the concern that the right has today for democracy and human rights. I would have liked at least the same concern in the past when we experienced a difficult situation in our country, when socialists, communists, and militants from other political forces were persecuted, exiled, tortured, and some even made to disappear; situations to which our chancellor, who accompanies us in this Chamber, can testify because he also lived through them. (Jaime Naranjo, PS, May 29, 2018)

Accordingly, left-wing politicians interpret the government's vocal condemnation of the Maduro regime as a political maneuver to discredit the Socialist opposition in Chile itself. Consequently, they also criticize the *visa de responsabilidad democrática*, extended to displaced Venezuelans, as having the purpose of casting Piñera as a regional leader committed to fighting Socialism instead of a visa with a real humanitarian purpose.

Within the left-wing opposition, it is important to distinguish the more radical left parties like the Communist Party. Some of its representatives entirely reject the government's assessment that Chile should be defined as a beacon of democracy and socioeconomic development in Latin America and that the Socialist Maduro regime is a dictatorship that can be accused of committing human rights violations against its population. For example, one deputy from the Communist Party unfavorably compares the turnout in the Chilean elections to elections in Venezuela, suggesting that it is the Chilean government that lacks legitimacy rather than the Maduro regime: "It is

curious that those who seek to disqualify the process allude to the abstention of 52%, which is lower than that registered in Chile in the last presidential elections, despite which the elected celebrated their few votes with joy” (Carmen Hertz, PC, May 29, 2018). In consequence, politicians from the PC see no reason for giving Venezuelan citizens privileged admission to Chile.

4.3 Who are “they”? People in need, but not refugees

Much as with the framing of the “we,” The Power of the Majority’s framing of migrants and refugees contains ambivalences. One has to distinguish between the framing of migrants and refugees in general and displaced Venezuelans in particular. In principle, the left alliance defines migrants and refugees first and foremost in *legal* terms as carriers of fundamental human rights. They are seen as a vulnerable population whose human rights are potentially at stake, for example, because they are discriminated against or do not have access to basic services. While the left-wing opposition agrees with the government that migrants have to respect Chilean laws and that criminals should be excluded, it warns against a “criminalization” of migrants that undermines their rights: “It is necessary to take into account the points that I have mentioned, in order to end the criminalization of migration since it is made up of people with full rights who, obviously, deserve our respect” (Isabel Allende, PS, August 13, 2019).

Furthermore, many left-wing politicians also go one step further by framing migrants in *moral* terms. They point to their own experiences of emigration and exile and the corresponding experience of vulnerability to signal their sympathy with and sense of duty to support the migrants and refugees coming to Chile. For instance, the following deputy, who was exiled to Sweden under the Pinochet dictatorship, points to how Chileans were treated abroad:

And we should not forget ... that countries, for example, like Sweden, like Venezuela, where today so many Venezuelans are arriving in our country, welcomed thousands of compatriots in difficult times in our country, who not only escaped, let’s say because crimes against humanity were committed here, but they also fled due to economic problems and went to other countries. They were always welcomed with a lot of solidarity, and always, always, countries were respecting their rights and protecting them as it should be. (Jiménez Tucapel, PPD, January 16, 2019)

Additionally, The Power of the Majority views migrants and refugees through a *cultural* frame. While the governing parties judge them primarily in terms of their economic contributions to Chile’s development, the left-wing opposition tends to emphasize more strongly migrants’ and refugees’ positive cultural and intellectual contributions. The diversity contributed by migration is explicitly framed in positive terms. The example of the SS Winnipeg referred to earlier is frequently used by the

Chilean left to describe migrants and refugees as assets rather than burdens. Bachelet mentions specifically artists and intellectuals when describing migrants' contributions to Chile: "There is no other way to open ourselves to the contribution of the Andrés Bellos, the Roser Brus, and all the anonymous hands that continue to come to add to our development in all fields" (Michelle Bachelet, PS, August 21, 2017).

The value the left places on the diversity and cultural contributions of migrants also entails taking a stance against discriminating between them based on their cultural, ethnic, or national backgrounds. In the debate on migration, they often speak out against fomenting xenophobia against migrants and using racist or discriminatory language.

However, despite these framings of migrants and refugees in general, the left-wing opposition rejects the way the government singles out displaced Venezuelans as a group of special concern based on its framing of the Venezuela crisis as a question of *international relations*, and of displaced Venezuelans as living proof of the failure of a Socialist experiment. Left-wing politicians do not deny that Venezuelan migrants are escaping dire socioeconomic conditions and an authoritarian regime. But they contend that migrants from other countries face similar conditions, for example, those from Haiti, with whom the government has not shown the same level of solidarity. Consequently, they criticize the government for having a double standard in dealing with migrants motivated by its foreign policy agenda, leading to discrimination between immigrant groups. José Miguel Insulza from the PS comments on these visa regulations as follows:

We have some doubts regarding the visa categories. While this bill was being presented (in parentheses, the President of the Republic presented it about a year and a half ago in La Moneda; I was there), two decrees were announced at the same time. And, to be very clear, one was to receive Venezuelans and another to remove Haitians. Both have been fulfilled! I believe that this is discretionary and should not happen. I think that it is necessary to have visa categories that are very clear and that all of them make real this principle that we are all equal before the law, also foreigners. (José Miguel Insulza, PS, August 13, 2019)

Again, in this case, it is necessary to distinguish the position of the more radical left parties within The Power of the Majority. The representatives of the Communist Party have a very different view of the causes of the Venezuelan displacement crisis. In their view, Venezuela is indeed going through a humanitarian crisis that pushes Venezuelans abroad, but not necessarily because of its government's actions. Rather, there is a crisis because of the international sanctions imposed against Venezuela, primarily by the US under President Trump. Consequently, they view displaced Venezuelans not as refugees escaping a dictatorship and human rights violations but as migrants escaping a socioeconomic crisis caused by international sanctions:

Nor are they referring to the fierce economic and financial blockade imposed on Venezuela by Trump, one of the most discredited presidents in the world and about

whose mental health there are serious doubts. The blockade has been a criminal act dedicated to fabricating misery and the exodus of Venezuelans to justify a “humanitarian” intervention, a terminology used to mask a military intervention, as occurred in Somalia or Kosovo. (Carmen Hertz, PC, May 29, 2018)

Given this assessment of the Venezuelan displacement crisis, these left-wing representatives judge the government’s *visa de responsabilidad democrática* not as a humanitarian gesture but as an interventionist foreign policy instrument directed against the Maduro government.

To summarize, we argue that the way the left-wing opposition parties defined the “we” and the “others” can help explain its indeterminate position on admitting displaced Venezuelans. On the one hand, they defined Chile as a country committed to international law and human rights. This framing is given special weight with reference to Chileans’ own history of dictatorship, exile, and emigration. Furthermore, Chile was defined as a multicultural country that has been positively shaped by the cultural contributions of migrants and refugees from around the world. It follows that, in principle, the opposition parties supported a welcoming and human rights–based migration policy. This position is also expressed in the amendments they suggested to the government’s migration bill, such as including the principle of non-refoulement.

On the other hand, however, the left-wing opposition was reluctant to position Chile as an ideological rival of the Socialist regime in Venezuela and to single out displaced Venezuelans for special treatment, even though it did not deny the authoritarian character of the regime and the socioeconomic crisis in Venezuela (except for the more radical sectors). This reluctance has to do with Chile’s politically divisive history and the left’s mistrust of the government’s intentions when it criticized the Maduro regime. Overall, it can be argued that the reluctance to support the government with regard to the Venezuela crisis and internal divisions within the left-wing coalition collectively precluded taking a clear stance on the Venezuelan displacement crisis.

5. Summary and accounting for differences between political parties

Table 8.1 summarizes the positions and dominant frames of the two main party coalitions regarding their migration policy and admitting displaced Venezuelans in Chile. The government and the opposition were ambivalent in framing the “we” and the “others” (displaced persons from Venezuela) for different reasons. In both cases, the ambivalence in framing then led to ambivalent policies. As we have seen, in their definition of the “we,” the government and right-wing coalition emphasized mainly national sovereignty and economic development and positioned Chile internationally as a regional role model and rival of Venezuela. In contrast, the left-wing opposition emphasized human rights, international law, and moral elements of self-definition—harking back to the country’s military dictatorship—but rejected

positioning Chile in international terms as a regional rival of Venezuela. As regards migrants and refugees, the right-wing coalition again emphasized economic, legal, and security aspects, distinguishing between those who can “contribute” and those who do not and break the law. They singled out displaced Venezuelans as a group of special concern because they escape a dictatorship and rival regime, though they were not categorized as “refugees.” In contrast, the left-wing coalition highlighted the human rights of refugees and the cultural contributions of migrants and refugees and emphasized the moral obligations toward them but rejected singling out displaced Venezuelans for special treatment. We argue that these framings resulted in a policy of conditioned admission by the government and an indeterminate position from the left-wing opposition.

Looking at these results, it seems that the policy positions of the right-wing government and the left-wing opposition on admitting displaced Venezuelans in Chile deviated from the common expectations of cleavage theory. The theory suggests that left-wing parties tend to adopt a more open migration and asylum policy based on a humanitarian framing than right-wing parties, which promote more restrictive policies based on security and anti-multiculturalist framings (Akermann 2015; Dancygier & Margalit 2020). In Chile, however, it is the right-wing coalition government that promoted the humanitarian visa for displaced Venezuelans (though with the mentioned restrictive conditions), while the left-wing opposition remained more reluctant to take a stance on this issue. How can we make sense of these policy positions? As we have argued in Chapter 2, we need to more closely examine the specific political constellation in a country and the frames that guide the different political parties instead of applying a “one size fits all” perspective.

Since the return to democracy in 1990 and until the period of analysis, Chile's political landscape has been essentially shaped by a left–right division between two major party blocs.²² It maps onto three underlying political cleavages that largely (though not perfectly) overlap (Bargsted & Somma 2016; Bonilla et al. 2011; Valenzuela et al. 2018). The first is an economic cleavage, which opposes the free market versus more redistributive economic ideologies. It is represented mainly by the Socialist and Communist parties to the left and the National Renovation and UDI to the right. The second cleavage is religious and revolves around the question of

²² Only in recent years can fragmentation and increasing volatility be observed, coupled with increasing voter dealignment and declining citizen trust in the political parties (Bargsted & Somma 2016). Until the 2017 elections, Chilean politics was dominated by two contending voting blocs: The center-left to left “Coalition of Parties for Democracy (in Spanish, “Concertación,” renamed “New Majority,” in Spanish, “Nueva Mayoría” in 2013, but basically consisting of the same parties) and a center-right to right coalition (bearing different names, but mostly referred to as the “Alliance,” in Spanish, “Alianza” and more recently Let's Go Chile). Authors have discussed different reasons for this stability (Alemán & Saeigh 2007). One reason is the so-called “binomial voting system,” based on an electoral law inherited from the Pinochet regime. Its effect was to force political parties into two contending coalitions and to ensure almost equal representation between majority and opposition parties. In legislative elections under this system, each constituency elected two representatives, meaning the party bloc with fewer votes effectively receives almost equal representation. This binomial voting system was abolished for the 2017 elections. The 2017 elections brought a change to the system of alliances, primarily through the defection of the Christian Democrats from the New Majority, forming a new centrist party coalition, Democratic Convergence and the rise of the new-left challenger Broad Front, primarily a product of the youth movements against Chile's unequal educational system. A candidate of the latter (Gabriel Boric) would go on to win the 2021 presidential elections.

Table 8.1 Positionings and framings in the debate on the admission of refugees in Chile

	Government and right-wing coalition		Left-wing opposition	
Policy position	Conditioned admission of displaced Venezuelans		Indeterminate, no alternative policy on displaced Venezuelans	
Framing	Who are “we”?	Who are “they”?	Who are “we”?	Who are “they”?
Legal	Chile is a sovereign country with full authority over its borders	Displaced Venezuelans are “migrants,” not “refugees”; a clear distinction has to be made between regular and irregular migrants	Chile is committed to international law and human rights because of its history of dictatorship	Migrants/refugees are a vulnerable population endowed with human rights
Economic	Chile has become a “land of opportunities” due to its successful socioeconomic development	Migrants/refugees are a human capital	[Similar to the government, but less salient]	—
Cultural	[Similar to the opposition, but less salient]	—	Chile is a multicultural country of immigration	Migrants/refugees are culturally enriching
International	Chile is a regional role model and ideological rival of Socialist Venezuela	Displaced Venezuelans are victims of a dictatorship and socioeconomic mismanagement	Because of its politically divisive history, Chile should <i>not</i> position itself as ideological rival of Venezuela	Displaced Venezuelans should <i>not</i> be singled out for political reasons
Security	—	Some migrants may have criminal backgrounds	—	—
Moral	—	—	As a former country of emigration and exile, Chile owes a debt of gratitude to other countries	Migrants/refugees compare with Chilean exiles and emigrants

the separation between (Catholic) Church and state and the influence of religion on society. Again, this cleavage opposes liberal left-wing parties with a more secular stance (Radical, Socialist, and Communist Party) and conservative right-wing parties with a more religious orientation (National Renovation, UDI, and the centrist Christian Democrats).

The third cleavage emerged with Chile's transition from dictatorship to democracy. It opposes parties on the right that supported a continuation of Pinochet's rule in the 1988 referendum (mainly the UDI and parts of the RN) and parties on the left that opposed Pinochet.²³ In fact, some personnel from right-wing parties had held political posts under Pinochet's regime, while political figures on the left had been involved in the opposition to this regime, often in exile. While the structuring force of this democratic–authoritarian cleavage seems to be in decline in recent years, and Piñera and other leaders of the right have distanced themselves from the Pinochet regime (Bargsted & Somma 2016), it certainly continues to be relevant in symbolic terms by shaping Chileans' interpretations of history and their collective memories of both the "Socialist experiment" under Allende and Pinochet's military rule. For example, according to a survey from 2015 (CERC-MORI 2015), around 75 percent of Chileans still consider that the divisions caused by the military dictatorship have not yet been reconciled. While a large majority of supporters of left and center-left parties consider that a *coup d'état* is "never justified," only 31 percent of UDI supporters and 49 percent of RN supporters say so.

Based on cleavage theory, one would have expected the right-wing government to adopt a more restrictive stance toward displaced Venezuelans than the left-wing opposition. Indeed, both groups' general stance on migration and asylum policy reflected their position within the left or right political camp. Much like other right-wing parties in other countries (Akkermann 2015; Dancygier & Margalit 2020), the right-wing Let's Go Chile coalition emphasized mostly the rule of law and economic frames where migrants are primarily viewed as human capital that can contribute to Chile's socioeconomic development. At the same time, it emphasized national sovereignty with the view that the state and not international law has the last say, even when it comes to admitting forced migrants. However, the Chilean right deviated from other right-wing parties in that it did not draw cultural boundaries against migrants and refugees.

In contrast, the left-wing The Power of the Majority emphasized legal, cultural, and moral frames. They stressed migrants' cultural contributions to society and, above all, the need to protect the human rights of vulnerable migrant groups, partly because of the Chilean left's own experiences of emigration and exile under Pinochet. This emphasis largely aligns with the position of other parties from the mainstream left in other countries.

However, the Venezuelan displacement crisis triggered two further aspects that can help explain why the party positions on the admission of displaced Venezuelans

²³ This opposition to Pinochet is the main reason the centrist Christian Democrats joined the leftist coalition, even though it had opposed the Allende presidency.

deviate from the initial theoretical expectations of cleavage theory. The first reason has to do with foreign policy and international relations. As some of the previous literature has highlighted, international hostilities or alliances between countries can indeed shape the willingness to admit refugees (Abdelaaty 2021; Moorthy & Brathwaite 2019), which seems to be the case in Chile as well. Piñera's right-wing coalition was a clear ideological rival of Maduro's Socialist regime, criticizing its authoritarian character and socioeconomic mismanagement. The government attempted to assume regional leadership in opposing Maduro, calling for his deposition and international sanctions. This leadership role entailed a commitment to aid displaced Venezuelans (even though, as we have seen, this was a commitment conditioned by the government's stance on migration reform to "put the house in order").

A second reason that can help explain the party positions on the Venezuelan displacement crisis is Chile's politically divisive history. The question of whether the Socialist Maduro regime should be declared a dictatorship that commits human rights violations seems to have evoked the historical memory of Chile's own experiment with Socialism, followed by Pinochet's military dictatorship and the political violence and displacement it caused. For the Chilean right, the regime of Maduro seems to serve as an example of what happens if a country experiments with Socialism: extreme polarization, political chaos, and a severe socioeconomic crisis that pushes millions abroad. This interpretation resonates with the right's interpretation of the Allende presidency in Chile as having led the country to bankruptcy and the brink of a civil war. Consequently, Venezuelan migration to Chile is interpreted as evidence of the superiority of Chile's contemporary free-market and liberal democratic model, much like refugees fleeing from Communism during the Cold War put into evidence the superiority of the "West." The case of Venezuela serves as a warning for what "could have" happened in Chile.

For the left, in turn, the issue is more complicated. On the one hand, most of its representatives—except from the radical left—have condemned the authoritarian character of the Maduro regime and its human rights violations. On the other hand, however, the left is reluctant to align with right-wing parties on this issue, not least because this would play into the hands of the rights' interpretation of history. The left rejects the right's claim that Socialism leads to authoritarianism and socioeconomic crisis, pointing to the Pinochet example of a dictatorship arising from right-leaning ideology. As long as the right fails to unequivocally condemn the Pinochet dictatorship, its moral authority to condemn the Maduro regime is questionable. This juxtaposition places the left-wing parties in Chile in a dilemma that hinders them from formulating a consistent policy alternative concerning the Venezuelan crisis.

Overall, the findings in this chapter show that it is crucial to delve into the specific political constellation and discourse of a country to understand its refugee policy. In the case of Chile, the interpretations of the "we" and the "others" in terms of international relations and historical memory have a significant influence on parties' migration and asylum policy positions. We argue that these two frames can help explain the initially puzzling position of Chilean politics toward the Venezuelan displacement crisis.

6. Appendix

Table 8.2 Overview of sampled debates in the Chilean Chamber of Deputies and Senate, and other political statements

Date	Public forum	Topic	Speaker	Party affiliation
August 21, 2017	Public speech	Announcement of the migration reform bill (11395-06)	Bachelet, Michelle (President)	PS
April 9, 2018	Public speech	Announcement of migration reform bill (8970-06)	Piñera, Sebastián (President)	RN
May 29, 2018	Chamber of Deputies	Assessment of the Venezuela crisis	Ampuero, Roberto (Minister of Foreign Affairs)	Evópoli
			Bellolio, Jaime	UDI
			Del Real, Catalina	RN
			Hertz, Carmen	PC
			Naranjo, Jaime	PS
			Undurraga, Francisco	Evópoli
			Vidal, Pablo	RD
			Walker, Matías	DC
December 15, 2018	Public speech	Statement on the UN Global Compact for Migration	Piñera, Sebastián (President)	RN
January 16, 2019	Chamber of Deputies	Migration reform bill (8970-06)	Cicardini, Daniella	PS
			Coloma, Juan Antonio	UDI
			García, René Manuel	RN
			Hertz, Cármen	PC
			Jimenez, Tucapel	PPD
			Pérez, Catalina	RD
			Pérez, Joanna	PDC
			Undurraga, Francisco	Evópoli
			Yeomans, Gael	Convergencia Social
July 16, 2019	Op-Ed in "El Líbero"	"Chile sin barreras"	Kast, José Antonio	PLR

Continued

Table 8.2 *Continued*

Date	Public forum	Topic	Speaker	Party affiliation
August 13, 2019	Senate	Migration reform bill (8970-06)	Allende, Isabel	PS
			Coloma, Juan Antonio	UDI
			Durana, José Miguel	UDI
			Insulza, José Miguel	PS
			Kast, Felipe	Evópoli
			Latorre, Juan Ignacio	RD
			Moreira, Iván	UDI
			Pizarro, Jorge	PDC
			Quintana, Jaime	PS

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An economic perspective on immigration

Singapore's closed doors for refugees and open doors for immigrants with human capital

1. Introduction

Since its independence in 1965, Singapore has rapidly transformed itself from an underdeveloped country into one of the most prosperous countries in the world. Singapore is a very diverse country of different ethnicities, religions, and languages. Chinese, Malays, and Indians form the largest ethnic groups, and there are four official languages in Singapore (English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil). In addition, Singapore is home to a variety of religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and Christianity). Finally, Singapore has a very high number of migrants among its population, representing one of the largest shares in the world (Yang et al. 2017). Of the 5.6 million people in Singapore, nearly 2.2 million are immigrants (Department of Statistics Singapore 2023). Only one group is surprisingly absent from Singapore's diverse population: refugees and asylum seekers. Singapore refuses to accept refugees at all and strictly controls its national borders to prevent people fleeing persecution from entering Singapore's territory, even though Singapore has become one of the wealthiest societies in the world and is familiar with a wide range of diverse people.

There is definitely no shortage of refugees that Singapore could accommodate. Like Myanmar, Singapore is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The Rohingya are an ethnic group within Myanmar that has been oppressed for a long time. Many Rohingya have been repeatedly displaced and had to leave their country for fear of persecution. In 2017, for example, massive violent attacks took place, resulting in over 700,000 Rohingya leaving Myanmar (UNHCR 2019). As of 2022, more than 1.3 million Rohingya live abroad, most of them in refugee camps in Bangladesh (UNHCR 2023). However, neither the Singaporean government under the People's Action Party (PAP) nor the opposition parties have been willing to accept a single refugee from Myanmar.

The puzzling fact that Singapore is very open to receiving labor migrants and, at the same time, absolutely rejects admitting refugees can be explained by the understanding of its national identity and the role of migrants. The government and the opposition parties both frame the “we” based on four characteristics: First, Singapore emphasizes the principle of national self-determination and rejects interference by any international institutions or other countries based on human rights considerations. A consequence of this self-image is that Singapore, like other former Southeast Asian colonies, has not signed the Geneva Refugee Convention. Second, Singapore portrays itself as an economically very successful country that has risen from an underdeveloped nation into one of the most prosperous countries in the world; this success is based primarily on the skills of its population and the human capital that migrants bring with them. Refugees—who are perceived as lacking human capital to contribute—are seen as a potential economic burden to the country’s ongoing success. Third, Singapore is understood as an integrated multiethnic society. Heterogeneity in terms of linguistic, religious, and, above all, ethnic diversity—and not homogeneity—is the main characteristic of the so-called “Singaporean core.” However, this diversity is interpreted as precarious, and refugees and too many migrants might tip the balance. Finally, political parties in Singapore embrace a communitarian conception of Singapore, according to which Singaporeans form a cohesive community of solidarity. Closely related to this idea of communitarianism is the expectation that the state acts as a caring and wise authority that protects the community and its citizens, not foreigners.

In line with this self-perception, the Singaporean discourse sharply distinguishes between citizens and foreigners, whether refugees or migrants. All foreigners are interpreted primarily through an economic lens. They are considered and evaluated from the standpoint of how much human capital and wealth they bring and to what extent their wealth and human capital might contribute to the prosperity of Singapore’s core population. Refugees are implicitly interpreted within this cost–benefit equation as people unlikely to bring any benefit to Singapore. The economic interpretation of migrants and refugees is complemented by a cultural framing. More migrants, especially those interpreted as having no economic value, like refugees, would threaten Singapore’s cultural identity by upsetting the society’s multiethnic balance. Other frames, especially a moral perspective based on humanitarian considerations, do not play a role at all.

While in most other countries, we find clear differences between the government and the opposition parties, in Singapore, both are completely united in their strict rejection of refugees. They differ only with regard to admitting migrants. While the government favors admitting more migrants, as it assumes that Singapore needs more human capital, the opposition—mainly the social democratic “Workers’ Party” (WP)—is against this policy. Both camps view migrants as human capital that can be exploited for the benefit of Singapore. The opposition parties, however, portray migrants as a threat to Singapore’s multiracial balanced identity and as competitors to native Singaporeans for scarce resources (in the labor and housing market).

2. Background of the debate

2.1 Country information

Today's Singapore was once (1819–1943) a crown colony of the British Empire, then occupied by Japan during World War II (1943 to 1945) and became again a British colony in 1945 (this time with more rights of self-determination). The separation from colonial rule took place step by step. During a brief interim phase, Singapore was united with Malaysia (1963–65). The present Republic of Singapore was founded in 1965. With a population of only 5.6 million people, Singapore belongs to the group of the smallest countries in the world ([Department of Statistics Singapore 2023](#)). Three features of Singapore's contemporary society are particularly significant for an understanding of Singapore's identity and the debate over admitting migrants and refugees: the multiethnic composition of Singapore, its tremendous economic success, and, finally, the specific characteristics of the political regime.

Singapore has been a multiethnic country from the very beginning. The ethnic heterogeneity dates back to the British colonial period, when people first immigrated from China, then from India, and later from Malaysia. Chinese (about 75.4 percent), Malays (13.6 percent), and Indians (8.6 percent) formed the largest ethnic groups when Singapore became an independent state ([Warwick 1966: 237](#)). Each of these groups was, in turn, internally divided into different sub-ethnic groups. The Constitution of Singapore declared the new state a “multiracial nation” with equality for all races. The relational numerical strength of the three dominant ethnic groups has hardly changed to date: Chinese (75.9 percent), Malays (15 percent), and Indians (7.5 percent) still form the largest groups; 1.6 percent have another ethnic origin ([Department of Statistics Singapore 2023](#)). Since the different ethnic groups speak different languages and often belong to different religions, Singapore is also a multilingual and multireligious country. There are four official languages (Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, and English), with English the language spoken in the administration and educational systems and serving as a bridging language between the other languages. Singapore is home to a variety of religions. The most important in terms of numbers are Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and Christianity, while about 20 percent of the population does not belong to any religion ([Department of Statistics Singapore 2023](#)).

In the view of the PAP government and the opposition parties, this ethnic diversity is quite precarious and harbors potential conflicts (Goh 2008, [2019](#)). For example, there are clear differences between the three major ethnic groups in terms of average income or children's success in the school system. The Chinese perform the best, the Malays do the worst, and the Indians are between the two groups ([Moore 2000](#)). Consequently, the government strives not to discriminate against any groups and to give each of them fair and equitable opportunities from the outset. For instance, the government's housing policy aims to ensure that different ethnic groups are equally represented in different neighborhoods to avoid ethnic segregation and potential conflicts that might result ([Phang & Helble 2016](#)). Mutual respect is lauded in public

statements, and insults to other ethnic groups are classified as a criminal offense (Neo 2011).

When Singapore became independent in 1965, the conditions for the country's successful development were anything but favorable. It was a small city-state with no natural resources, a very low level of prosperity, and an illiteracy rate of about 40 percent among the population older than 15 (Data.gov.sg 2020). Today, the picture looks quite different. If one looks at the various statistical indicators that allow us to compare different countries, Singapore is one of the most successful countries in the world. According to recent results of the PISA-Study (Program for International Student Assessment), which surveys the academic performance of students in eighty countries in mathematics, science, and reading, Singapore took second place worldwide (FactsMaps (OECD) 2018). A similar success is the country's rapid economic development. While Singapore was a poor and underdeveloped country at the time of its independence, it now has one of the highest GDP per capita in the world, with a very high standard of living, especially for citizens, less so for migrants living in the country. According to the Human Development Index, Singapore ranks twelfth out of 189 countries in 2022 (UNDP 2023). Many other measurements—life expectancy, infant mortality, healthcare, crime rate, and anti-corruption index—also reveal that Singapore is now a leading world country.

For a long time, social scientists assumed that a country's economic development would sooner or later lead to democratization (Lipset 1959). History and the development of Singapore, in particular, have taught us that modernization does not have to go hand in hand with democracy. Singapore is a new type of regime that does not fit into conventional classifications, as it combines a capitalist market economy with a technocratic, semi-democratic political regime and a communitarian spirit (Chua 2017). The organization Freedom House—which assesses the degree of democratic freedoms institutionalized in a country—distinguishes between civil and political rights and ultimately divides countries into three groups: free, partly free, and not free. Singapore is placed in the second group as only partly free and ranked forty-seventh in the list of countries (Freedom House 2023). In the Economist Groups' Democracy Index, which ranks political regimes in four categories (full democracy, flawed democracy, hybrid regime, or authoritarian regime) based on a variety of indicators, Singapore ranks seventieth out of 167 countries (Economist Intelligence Unit 2023). And finally, the NGO Reporters Without Borders, which determines the freedom of the press in various countries, assigned Singapore the rank 129th out of 180 in 2023 (Reporters Without Borders 2023).

The restrictions of freedoms and democracy in Singapore can be traced back to the dominance of one party that determines Singaporean politics. Although Singapore is a parliamentary democracy, Singaporean politics has experienced uninterrupted rule by the People's Action Party, which has continuously formed the government under the leadership of a prime minister. Various reasons are cited in the literature as to why the People's Action Party has managed to remain consistently in power (Hwee 2002; Chua 2017; Abdullah 2017). The majority voting system in force is one of the factors, as it results in the candidate in a constituency who receives the

most votes winning the seat in parliament, and the votes received by other parties are lost. Although opposition parties won, on average, more than 30 percent of the popular vote, they received only between 1.2 percent and 4.9 percent of parliamentary seats (Hwee 2002: 209). “Gerrymandering” (manipulating the boundaries of electoral districts) is another strategy used by the governing PAP to disadvantage opposition parties. The opposition’s ability to mobilize is also hampered by the fact that the prime minister can order new elections at very short notice, and the campaign period is limited to only nine days. In addition, there are a variety of overt and covert measures by the ruling party aimed at obstructing opposition parties and at restricting freedom of speech, press, and their ability to organize (Chua 2017).

However, attributing its success primarily to its policy of restricting democratic rights overlooks a central feature of the PAP government. The regime’s legitimacy is largely based on its good governance performance and less on the opportunities for democratic participation by citizens or social groups (Tan 2018: 7; Chua 2017: 51). As described above, Singapore has transformed from a developing country to one of the most successful countries in the world in a relatively short time. The PAP government’s success has to do with the fact that it pursues pragmatic, solution-oriented, and technocratic policies that rely heavily on experts (Chua 1995).¹ In addition, while in other countries where a particular party has been in government for many decades, corruption tends to increase, this is surprisingly not the case in Singapore. Singapore ranks fifth in the world in the ranking conducted by Transparency International (Transparency International 2022).

Singapore’s technocratic orientation is also evident in its migration and refugee policies. Singapore has one of the highest percentages of migrants in the world. As mentioned, the total population of Singapore is more than 5.6 million, with a composition of approximately 62 percent citizens, 9 percent permanent residents, and roughly 30 percent nonresidents (Department of Statistics Singapore 2023). Economic migrants are seen as a key source of wealth creation and are admitted with the goal of increasing Singapore’s prosperity. Singapore regulates immigration through a fine-grained work pass system consisting of five categories (for the following, see Yang 2017; Nowrasteh 2018): (1) Work Permit, (2) S-Pass (Short Term Employment Pass), (3) E-Pass (Employment Pass), (4) PE-Pass (Personalized Employment Pass), and (5) Entre-Pass for foreign entrepreneurs (Ministry of Manpower 2022). The lowest category is the Work Permit. A Work Permit is intended for low-skilled persons working in the low-wage sector. By far, the largest proportion of nonresidents, namely 58 percent, fall into the category of Work-Permit immigrants. The S-Pass is meant for mid-level skilled employers having at least a degree or a diploma and a monthly salary of at least SGD2500 (US\$1848), whereas the E-Pass is intended for highly skilled professionals. Accordingly, applicants must have a university degree or special skills and a monthly salary of at least SGD 4500 (US\$3327). Very high-earning

¹ In their survey study, Oliver and Ostwald (2018) showed that Singaporeans vote for the PAP party primarily because it enjoys the highest credibility (trustworthiness, competence, and professional qualification).

professionals whose monthly income is above SGD 12,000 (US\$8872) can apply for a PE Pass (Personalized Employment Pass), which gives them more flexibility. Finally, entrepreneurs who want to establish a business in Singapore can apply for a so-called Entre-Pass.

The different work pass categories go hand in hand with different rights that the respective holders have. At the bottom of the hierarchy are Work Permit holders:

Work Permit holders are under strict regulations. They can only work in the occupation specified on the Permit, and the Permit is terminated once the employment ends. They are not allowed to bring family members, nor to marry a Singapore citizen or a permanent resident (PR) without the approval of the Ministry of Manpower. Female workers are prohibited from pregnancy and childbirth in Singapore. Furthermore, Work Permit holders are not eligible to apply for Permanent Residence (PR). (Yang et al. 2017: 12)

While the government's housing policy ensures that the different ethnicities of Singapore's citizens are equally represented in different neighborhoods, the same does not apply to Work Permit holders. They live in special dormitories segregated from the citizens (Goh 2018). Immigrants who belong to one of the other categories have more rights. For example, S-Pass and E-Pass holders can bring close family members, marry someone from Singapore, give birth to a child in Singapore, and finally, apply for permanent residence.

The preceding explanations should have made clear that Singapore's immigration regime interprets and classifies migrants predominantly as a commodity. Their value is determined by the level of skills and the wealth they bring with them. The less human capital and wealth an immigrant has, the fewer rights they will have when coming to Singapore. Consequently, low-skilled individuals, who are abundant in the world, are granted virtually no rights. Singapore's refugee policy fits into this picture. As refugees are interpreted as bringing no economic gain, Singapore refuses to host any refugees at all.

2.2 Critical discourse moments: The Rohingya refugee crisis and the debate on the "Population White Paper"

As explained in Chapter 3 of this book, one of the criteria we used to select the countries for our study is that there is a refugee crisis in the neighborhood, so the country is a potential destination country for refugees in the first place. In principle, this criterion is met for Singapore because it is located in the region that has witnessed the Rohingya refugee crisis. Accordingly, the question of admitting Rohingya refugees forms a critical discourse moment. However, a search of all parliamentary debates in Singapore revealed that admitting Rohingya was not an extensively discussed topic. There exists a broad social consensus on not admitting refugees. There is no political party that advocates taking in refugees. And hardly any civil society actors are

fighting for the rights of refugees in Singapore.² Accordingly, the parliamentary discourse on admitting Rohingya is short and consists of several question-and-answer sessions, during which MPs interrogate government representatives. Given this limited material, we considered the broader discourse on immigration by analyzing the controversial debate on the government's "Population White Paper." In this debate about labor migrants, the frames used are implicitly relevant for interpreting refugees as well.

The Rohingya refugee crisis

The Rohingya people are an ethnic group from Myanmar, most of whom live in Rakhine State on Myanmar's western coast. Myanmar is a majority Buddhist state, and the Rohingya people are primarily Muslims. The current conflict between the Myanmar state and nationalist Buddhists on the one side and the Rohingya and political organizations advocating for the interests of the Rohingya on the other has been going on for a long time and has historical roots dating back to colonial times (Blakemore 2019; Mithun 2018; Mohajan 2018; Ware & Laoutides 2018). During World War II, the Rohingya were allied with the British and fought against local Rakhine Buddhists, who were allied with the Japanese. The Rohingya were promised a Muslim state in return for their loyalty to the British. But this did not happen. Myanmar gained its independence from Britain in 1948; since then, the Rohingya have been living on the territory of Myanmar. There have been several unsuccessful attempts by Rohingya separatist movements to become independent from Myanmar and establish their own state or become part of Bangladesh.³

From the beginning, the government of Myanmar and nationalist Buddhists worked to cast out the Rohingya people, excluding them from its Constitution (Blakemore 2019). Though Myanmar recognizes 135 distinct ethnic groups, the Rohingya are not one of them. In 1982, Myanmar passed a law that denied the Rohingya citizenship. As noncitizens, Rohingya people lack basic rights within Myanmar and are considered stateless. Rohingya people cannot access social services or education, and their movement outside of Rakhine State is severely restricted. Myanmar has also imposed strict regulations on birth control and marriage.

The conflict between Myanmar and the Rohingya minority has led to various waves of displacement and flight.⁴ The conflict escalated again in 2017 after a Rohingya armed group attacked a Myanmar police unit. The government troops responded by destroying many villages, killing many civilians, and forcing nearly

² One exception is the relatively small organization "Advocates For Refugees—Singapore" (AFR-SG 2022).

³ These attempts began with Myanmar's colonial independence. Following independence, the Rohingya fought government forces in an attempt to gain autonomy or secede. In the 1970s, Rohingya separatist movements emerged again. The Burmese government launched a massive military operation in 1978 to expel so-called "foreigners." In the 1990s, the Rohingya Solidarity Organization was the main perpetrator of attacks on Burmese authorities. The Burmese government responded militarily.

⁴ The first of the latest exoduses took place in 2012, following riots in Rakhine State. Several residential areas were destroyed, and more than 100,000 people were displaced. A second exodus took place in 2015, again following civil violence in Rakhine State. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya were displaced, and many fled to neighboring countries, most of them to Bangladesh.

700,000 Rohingya to flee Myanmar, mainly to Bangladesh (Albert & Maizland 2020). As of 2022, approximately 1.3 million Rohingya have been forced to leave Myanmar. Due to its geographic proximity, more than 952,000 live in refugee camps in Bangladesh (UNHCR 2023). There are other destination countries like Malaysia, which hosts more than 150,000 refugees from Myanmar (UNHCR 2022). Many Rohingya embarked on risky sea journeys, and many have drowned, leading to the label “Asia’s new boat people.”

Even though Singapore is not a direct neighbor of Myanmar and accordingly can only be reached by sea via the Malacca Strait or by land via Malaysia, the refugee crisis took place in Singapore’s broader vicinity. In addition, Singapore and Myanmar, along with eight other countries, are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), in whose meetings the expulsion of the Rohingya from Myanmar was discussed. The official statements of the ASEAN states on the persecution of the Rohingya are all very carefully and diplomatically worded and avoid criticizing the government of Myanmar, referring to the complexity and history of the conflict. ASEAN states did not agree on a policy of admitting refugees from Myanmar and justified this by referencing the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other ASEAN Member States (Shivakoti 2017).

The Population White Paper

Unlike most of the other country chapters in this book (except Chile), in the case of Singapore, we analyzed not only the discourse on refugees but also the debate on economic migrants. This additional material enables us to better understand how Singapore’s refugee policy and underlying frames are embedded in its overall migration policy.

Immigration became a politically controversial issue in Singapore in the 2000s, when Singapore witnessed an unprecedented rate of immigration (Singh 2014). Exacerbated by the financial crisis and slowing growth rates in the late 2000s, an anti-immigration sentiment grew among the Singaporean population. As a consequence, the governing People’s Action Party lost votes in the 2011 general election (down from 66.6 percent to 60.1 percent, the lowest since independence), and the Workers’ Party obtained the best opposition results (Singh 2014).

In 2013, the government published the so-called “Population White Paper,” which summarized the government’s demographic strategy and migration policy and can be read as the government’s reaction to the immigration issue. Even though the government was criticized for its migration policy in the years before, it upheld its open-door policy toward migrants who bring wealth and human capital (Rahim 2015). The White Paper diagnosed two challenges that Singapore faces. First, Singapore’s population is projected to decline, given that fertility rates are below the replacement level. Second, Singapore’s population is aging, and the share of the younger working population is declining. To counter these demographic trends, the government argued that the country needed more migrants to sustain economic growth.

The government's suggestions triggered a broad parliamentary debate. The government's proposal was sharply criticized, mainly by the Workers' Party, and the White Paper was debated across other public forums. The resulting controversy led to some of the largest street protests in Singaporean history. According to demonstration organizers, more than 4000 people joined a rally in February 2013 to protest the White Paper (BBC News 2013). The White Paper was eventually endorsed with a 77–13 vote and some amendments: A demographic projection of 6.9 million residents in 2030, topped up by immigration, was left out, and a focus on infrastructure and transportation improvements was added (Lim 2013).

2.3 Description of the forum, political actors, and debates

As in the other chapters, we focus on analyzing parliamentary debates. Singapore is a parliamentary republic with a unicameral parliament. Members of Parliament are elected in different constituencies based on a first-past-the-post system. In addition, there are some Non-Constituency Members⁵ and some Nominated Members⁶ of Parliament. We collected speeches from three different terms of the Singapore parliament (2006 to 2011, 2011 to 2015, and 2016 to 2020). As Table 9.1 demonstrates, during the three parliamentary terms we analyzed, a vast majority of the Members of Parliament were members of the PAP. The leader of the political party with the most seats is asked by the president of Singapore to become the prime minister, meaning that the PAP has always formed the government. We analyzed statements made by the prime minister and his government, as well as from MPs of the ruling PAP. As to the opposition, we included speeches by the Workers' Party and the Singapore People's Party (SPP) in our sample.

The PAP has ruled Singapore since independence. According to Diane K. Mauzy and Robert Stephen Milne (2002), pragmatism and a “whatever-works” motto is PAP's main ruling principle. The PAP government consistently pursues two key objectives. Singapore is to become increasingly successful in all policy areas—economic growth, internal and external security, health, and education—and catch up with the world's leading countries. At the same time, the internal cohesion of a multi-ethnic society is to be strengthened or at least not endangered. The government seeks to achieve these goals through the following policy parameters (Chua 2017). First, political decisions are based on scientific knowledge, not political ideologies, often based on a cost–benefit analysis. Second, economic success is best achieved

⁵ Non-Constituency Members (NCMP) were introduced to the electoral system in 1984 (Hwee 2002). They are selected from the best performing candidates not elected in their constituencies during the election to ensure a minimum number of representations of the opposition in the parliament. They are called non-constituency since they do not represent any electoral constituency. Although they enjoy almost the same rights as elected Members of the Parliament, their voting rights are limited: They cannot vote in financial and constitutional matters (Hwee 2002).

⁶ A special committee recommends individuals, mostly members of the elite with specific expertise, for the role of Nominated Members of the Parliament (NMP). Then, the president appoints NMPs for one- to two-year terms. They are not affiliated with any party, and they do not represent any constituency. Similar to NCMPs, they enjoy restricted voting rights in the parliament (Hwee 2002).

Table 9.1 Number of seats per party in the parliament of Singapore, 2006–2020

	11th Term 2006–2011	12th Term 2011–2015	13th Term 2016–2020
People’s Action Party (PAP)	82	81	84
Workers’ Party (WP)	2	10	9
Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA)	1	—	—
Singapore People’s Party (SPP)	—	1	—
Nominated Members (NMP)	18	18	18

Source: [Parliament of Singapore \(2021\)](#)

through a capitalist market, low taxes, and competition. Third, it is central to the cohesion of society that the various ethnic groups are treated equally. The government tries to ensure that each group can follow its culture and practices. In addition, to strengthen the cohesion of society, the state ensures that the educational system is well equipped, the infrastructure functions well, and there is sufficient good housing ([Chua 2019](#)).

The Workers’ Party is the oldest and strongest opposition party in Singapore. According to [Abdullah \(2017: 501\)](#), the WP and PAP “possess essentially similar core philosophies,” which is why the WP “has been accused of being the ‘People’s Action Party’ in blue.” The WP does not oppose PAP’s main principles outlined above and has expressed that it is not ready to take over the government. It sees itself as a “check and correct” mechanism to the PAP. This self-image is expressed quite well in the party’s mission statement: “The Workers’ Party is an independent body that checks the government. The government must live up to its responsibilities and promises. We hold the government accountable to you and ensure good governance” ([The Workers’ Party 2021](#)).

Despite the similarities between the People’s Action Party and the Workers’ Party, ideological differences exist. The WP is a social democratic, center-left party. While PAP is more in favor of further economic development and more competition, the Workers’ Party is more concerned about the consequences that Singapore’s development may have on the poorer social classes. It favors greater state intervention in the economy, expanding the minimum wage policy, and increasing the state’s expenditure on public healthcare and housing ([Abdullah 2017: 502](#)). The party’s idea of solidarity, however, refers solely to Singapore’s citizens and not migrants and refugees. Accordingly, the Workers’ Party favors limiting immigration, as we see in a moment.

Singapore People’s Party was founded in 1994. The party was part of the Singapore Democratic Alliance until March 2011, after which it went its own way. Much like the WP, SPP does not fundamentally challenge the ruling party by formulating a substantive alternative. A look at the party’s latest program reveals many similarities with the Workers’ Party. SPP favors implementing a minimum wage and opposes increasing value-added tax because this would disproportionately burden

low-income groups. Instead, the party proposes to increase the income tax for the top one percent (Wong 2020).

Debates on the Rohingya refugee crisis

We scanned all parliamentary sessions between 2006 and 2020 during which the Rohingya refugee issue could have been brought to the table. As explained above, Singapore maintains a very restrictive refugee policy and has not taken in a single refugee from Myanmar. Moreover, none of the opposition parties in parliament has called for admitting refugees. The consequence of this broad consensus among the parties is that there has been no substantive debate on the Rohingya refugee crisis in the Singaporean parliament, where MPs deliberate whether to admit refugees and justify their opinions with arguments. Instead, we found eight parliamentary question-and-answer sessions during which MPs questioned the Minister for Foreign Affairs on the Rohingya refugee crisis in Myanmar. These sessions took place between March 24, 2009 and July 8, 2019. The questions were mainly asked by MPs from the ruling PAP party. Table 9.3 in the appendix lists the relevant information from all eight sessions.

The occasions that led to the inclusion of the Rohingya issue on the parliamentary agenda were either new displacements of Rohingya, reports of refugee camps in Bangladesh, or, most frequently, a meeting of the ASEAN countries discussing the situation in Myanmar. The Foreign Minister then reported on the results of the meeting. Even though the occasions for the debates were different, there is little difference between the debates in terms of the frames used. Furthermore, the questions and comments posed by opposition parties in parliament in no way indicate that the opposition would pursue a different refugee policy than the government or frame the issue differently. Accordingly, we cannot analyze any differences between the government and the opposition.⁷

We additionally checked if there were parliamentary debates on admitting Syrian refugees in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis since 2011. Again, we did not find any broad debate but two short question-and-answer sessions. One took place in September, the other in October 2016. We included the two sessions in our sample and analyzed them to see if we could learn more about political parties' framing strategies, even if Syrians constitute a different group of refugees.

The style of the debates on refugees in the Singaporean parliament differs significantly from the debates in the other countries in our study. Both the government and the MPs use diplomatic language, making it sometimes difficult to understand exactly their underlying meaning. One has to read between the lines and sometimes distinguish between a front stage of literal speech and a backstage of the actual meaning of the statements.

⁷ We further examined whether there has been any change in the government and opposition party stances toward admitting Rohingya after the last general election of July 2020. To do so, we scanned all parliamentary debates through June 2023. We found that the violent clashes in Myanmar and the situation of the Rohingya were on the parliamentary agenda four times. However, similar to previous sessions, no extensive debate took place. A change in the position of the government and the opposition compared to the phase 2006–20 could not be identified.

Debates on the Population White Paper

The specific interpretation of refugees by political parties in Singapore becomes more meaningful when looking at the interpretation of migrants in general. The debate on the so-called Population White Paper provides the right material for this analysis. The government's proposition was discussed in the parliament between February 4, 2013 and February 8, 2013, and passed with amendments (Lim 2013). On the one hand, we analyzed the speeches of MPs who supported the government's proposal: the speeches of the prime minister, the deputy prime minister, and another MP of the governing PAP. In addition, we analyzed the speech of the president of the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, a nominated MP who supported the government's proposal.

Furthermore, we analyzed the speeches of some MPs who oppose the government's proposal to increase the number of immigrants in Singapore. These include one MP from the Workers' Party as the main opposition party, one from the Singapore People's Party, who has only one Non-Constituency Member in the parliament, and one member from the Workers' Party, who presents himself as a representative of the Malay community in Singapore and expressed concerns of the Malay community about the racial balance of the country's population. Table 9.3 in the appendix shows more detail about which debates and which speeches we analyzed.

Interviews with policymakers and experts

As in the other country studies, we tried to supplement the discourse analysis of parliamentary debates with interviews with government and party officials on the one hand and scientific experts on the other. As explained in Chapter 3, the interviews' main function is to validate the results of the discourse analysis. Unfortunately, in the case of Singapore—apart from one interview with a former Member of Parliament—we did not succeed in interviewing any active politicians. Either the MPs did not respond to our request, or they backed out when they heard the topic of the interview.

In interviews with scientific experts, we asked them for their views on why Singaporean politicians are unwilling to grant interviews. Two explanations were given. First, politicians expect foreign academics, especially those from the “West,” to be critical of Singapore's refugee policy. They see this critical attitude as a form of Western intervention in the country's right to self-determination, which they interpret as an illegitimate and sometimes colonial attitude. Second, Singapore is not a democratic country. Criticizing the government, especially when expressed to foreigners, can have consequences for politicians, up to and including criminal prosecution. In October 2021, the Singaporean parliament passed the Foreign Intervention (Countermeasures) Act (FICA). The new law allows the government to investigate individuals suspected of operating as foreign agents engaged in “hostile information campaigns.” Reporters Without Borders has sharply criticized the law as another step toward censorship of the public sphere.⁸

⁸ As stated by Reporters Without Borders: “This bill gives the government a blank check to slap a ‘foreign agent’ label on any media outlet it dislikes and to impose extremely harsh sentences simply for the

In the case of Singapore, we have to rely on the results of our discourse analysis without being able to compare and validate them with findings of interviews with politicians. As a substitute, however, we conducted three interviews with social scientists who have conducted research on Singapore in general and migration policy in particular, and one human rights activist who leads a small civil society organization aiming to change Singapore's refugee policy. We used the results of these interviews to validate the discourse analysis findings and modified our interpretations accordingly.

3. The positioning and framing of the PAP government

The government and the opposition parties do not differ in their refugee policies; both are strictly opposed to admitting refugees. They also agree on the main features of migration policy, as both camps assume that Singapore needs labor migrants to maintain and develop its economy. However, while the government favors admitting more migrants, the opposition contradicts this policy. This section analyzes the refugee and migration policies the government is pursuing and how it frames Singapore's identity and the incoming "others." Since the government and the opposition parties agree on most points, many results of the following analyses also apply to the opposition. Then, Section 4 describes in more detail how the opposition parties differ from the government's migration policies and how this is backed up by a specific interpretation of the "we" and the "others."

3.1 Positioning: Closed doors for refugees and open doors for immigrants with human capital

Already in the first of the parliamentary sessions on the conflict in Myanmar we analyzed, the government's *refugee policy* is clearly formulated by Balaji Sadasivan, at that time Senior Minister of State in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "Singapore is not in a position to accept persons seeking political asylum or refugee status. This has been our policy for decades" (Balaji Sadasivan, PAP, March 24, 2009).

Similar statements can be found not only in the other parliamentary sessions on Myanmar and the Rohingya but also in the two sessions on Syrian refugees. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Vivian Balakrishnan, describes Singapore's refugee policy as follows: "But as a small densely packed, crowded city-state with limited land, Singapore is not in a position to accept any persons seeking refugee status, regardless of ethnicity or place of origin. This is a long-standing, indeed decades-old, Government policy" (Vivian Balakrishnan, PAP, January 27, 2016).

intent to publish content. And, above all, it would allow the government to introduce a system of prior censorship without saying so openly" ([Reporters Without Borders 2021](#)).

The quotes illustrate the extent to which Singapore's closed-door policy against refugees is dressed up in diplomatic language. The implicit message of the statement is: If we could, we would help and take in refugees. But because we are small and lack resources, we cannot help or take in refugees. Consequently, Rohingyas' attempts to migrate to Singapore are interpreted as a case of illegal migration. How they will be treated if they reach Singapore territory remains unanswered by the government. For instance, Eunice Elizabeth Olsen, a Nominated Member of Parliament, once asked the Minister of Foreign Affairs the following question: "So if they are caught trying to seek refuge in Singapore, will they be treated as all other illegal immigrants, which means that they will be brought to court and face caning?" (Eunice Elizabeth Olsen, Nominated Member, March 24, 2009).

The minister did not directly answer the question but only reiterated: "We will deal with them humanely" (Balaji Sadasivan, March 24, 2009). But in any case, refugees who approach the Singaporean border by boat are turned back: "We should also alleviate their plight where possible, including for naval vessels which encounter Rohingyas at sea to render appropriate assistance, such as by providing food, water and fuel" (Balaji Sadasivan, PAP, March 24, 2009). By mentioning "fuel" besides water and food, the minister expresses that refugees won't be allowed on the island but will be provided with additional fuel to reach another country.

Singapore's closed-door policy is supposedly complemented by a policy of humanitarian support for refugees in their home countries or host countries. As the Senior Minister of State in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Balaji Sadasivan states in a debate on the conflict in Myanmar in 2009: "However, we will assist such persons by providing humanitarian assistance" (Balaji Sadasivan, PAP, March 24, 2009). And Minister of Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan seconds: "It is important that we exercise collective human compassion to help these people" (Vivian Balakrishnan, PAP, January 9, 2017). In the debate held in October of the same year, he specifies what exactly he understands by humanitarian aid:

Given the scale of the humanitarian needs, the Singapore Government will be offering bilateral humanitarian aid to both Myanmar and Bangladesh. . . . For Myanmar, we will be offering an aid package comprising approximately SGD 100,000 (USD 62,500) worth of supplies from the Singapore Government. For Bangladesh, given that it is experiencing a more severe refugee crisis, we will be offering two humanitarian loads comprising approximately SGD 200,000 (USD 125,000) worth of supplies from the Singapore Government. (Vivian Balakrishnan, PAP, October 2, 2017)⁹

⁹ Singapore's self-portrayal as a humanitarian actor can also be found in the debate on the Syrian civil war and Syrian refugees. The government—as it is "a responsible global citizen"—announced that it will alleviate the suffering of the people through financial aid: "Singapore has been providing voluntary financial contributions to the UNHCR annually. We are not a major donor but a small country with limited resources. But as a responsible global citizen, we have increased our contributions to the UNHCR this year from USD 50000 to USD 60000. This is in recognition of the acute demands placed on the UNHCR, not just in Syria, but all around the world" (Vivian Balakrishnan, PAP, September 13, 2016).

Considering that Singapore is a very wealthy country, the total amount of money offered can be interpreted as symbolic politics because this small amount is definitely not enough to finance humanitarian aid. Hence, Singapore neither accepts refugees nor substantially supports them with humanitarian aid.

As the above quotes from the two senior officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs make clear, Singapore's refusal to accept refugees is a policy that applies to all refugees, not just Rohingya, and stands in a long tradition. Singapore is neither party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees nor its 1967 Protocol.¹⁰ It has neither signed the 1954 Convention on the Status of Stateless Persons nor the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness (UNHCR 2015). The last time Singapore agreed to take in refugees was in the late 1970s when it agreed with UNHCR to admit around 30,000 asylum seekers who had fled from the Indochina War, in particular Vietnamese boat people (Yuen 1990). However, refugees were taken in only under the condition that their numbers were limited to 1000 at any given time, their duration of stay should not exceed ninety days, that UNHCR should cover expenses, and that a foreign mission guaranteed their resettlement. The corresponding camp (on Hawkins Road) was opened in 1978 under the supervision of UNHCR and closed in 1996. Since then, no further refugees have been admitted (Palzkill 2017). This policy also applies to refugees from Myanmar. The government and the opposition parties are in complete agreement on this closed-border policy.

Singapore's restrictive policy toward admitting refugees is in tension with its *migration policy* and the fact that Singapore is one of the countries in the world with the highest percentage of migrants, as we have explained in greater detail above. What is more, while Singapore refuses to accept refugees, the government's White Paper proposes increasing the number of immigrants to counter the country's demographic trend. The government projects a 30 percent increase (up to 30,000 new permanent residents and 25,000 new citizens per year). Two more specific proposals were made. First, Singapore should open its borders to young and high-skilled immigrants who can become part of society by gaining Singaporean citizenship or permanent residence status. Second, the labor shortage in low-skilled sectors of the economy should be countered by recruiting temporary foreign workers.

To grasp how Singapore's restrictive refugee policy coexists with its openness to migrant workers, it is important to understand how the government envisions Singapore's collective identity.

¹⁰ Singapore is not the only Asian country that has not signed the treaties. Out of twenty-nine countries, only ten have signed the Geneva Convention and Protocol. Sara E. Davies (2008) summarized and critically discussed the various reasons for this reluctance. The most significant were the following: First, Asian states had no influence on the drafting and wording of the treaties; moreover, the treaties have a Eurocentric signature in terms of content because they focus on protecting individuals rather than groups. Second, national sovereignty and the idea of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states were considered more important. Finally, countries feared that the obligation to accept refugees could endanger the internal cohesion of states.

3.2 Who are “we”? An economically successful multiethnic community that prioritizes national sovereignty

Four characteristics are defined as typical for Singapore. The government and the opposition parties do not fundamentally differ in the dimensions of the definition of the “we”; however, they weigh the framing dimensions differently, as demonstrated in Section 4.¹¹

National sovereignty and the principle of non-interference: The Singaporean government’s refusal to admit any refugees in Singapore is based on its understanding of Singapore’s *international relations* and the importance of human rights, including the rights of refugees. Singapore is framed as a sovereign state among other sovereign states fully responsible for their respective domestic affairs. No state has the right—not to mention the duty—to interfere in another country. In comparison, universal human rights play a subordinate role and are partially interpreted as an invention of Western powers (Chew 1994). The ideas of national sovereignty and non-interference are seen to apply to refugee and migration policy as well. Each state has the right to determine who it admits to its territory, even if they are refugees whose lives are threatened. This framing of Singapore’s self-image can only be reconstructed indirectly by having a closer look at how the government interprets the causes of the Rohingya and Syrian refugee crises and the underlying conflicts.

Even though Singapore expresses concern about the situation in Myanmar and Syria, it considers the refugee issue a national sovereignty issue. In response to a question from a Member of Parliament about whether the issue of statelessness of the Rohingya was discussed at an ASEAN meeting, the Minister for Foreign Affairs replies as follows:

The simple answer is no. Citizenship is a fundamental political right. It goes to the heart of sovereignty, it goes to the heart of the construction of how a country looks at itself and identify who is in and who is out. I would humbly put to you that because this is such a fundamental point, it has to be settled within the country, through the political system, processes and stakeholders. This is not something foreigners should get involved in. (Vivian Balakrishnan, PAP, February 13, 2019)

Consequently, Singapore avoids criticizing the Myanmar government and even expresses an understanding of its policies:

The Myanmar government has introduced significant political and economic reforms. It is also tackling longstanding challenges like national reconciliation with the ethnic minorities, and rebuilding peace and stability in Rakhine State. The rehabilitation of Rakhine State will take time, and the Myanmar government’s

¹¹ While the first feature can be reconstructed from the debates about refugees, the other frames of the “we” can be derived from the debate about migration policy. The differences in weighting the four characteristics of the opposition parties are discussed in more detail in Section 4.

continued willingness to cooperate with the United Nations (UN), major donor countries, and other development partners to respond to the humanitarian needs in Rakhine State is a step in the right direction. (Kasiswiswanathan Shanmugam, PAP, April 14, 2014)

From the Singaporean government's perspective, the principle of national self-determination implies that each country is responsible for solving its own problems. When people have to leave their country, this indicates that a country is not solving its problems adequately. Accordingly, Singapore interprets the flight of the Rohingya as a domestic issue of Myanmar, which is "exported" to other countries in the region and places a burden on Singapore and all other ASEAN states. However, as the principle of non-intervention in the affairs of other countries is so pronounced, the government avoids explicit criticism of Myanmar's government. Myanmar is often not even mentioned when the Foreign Minister diagnoses that the flight of the Rohingya is effectively outsourcing a problem to other countries: "ASEAN member countries should not 'export' their problems to one another" (Balaji Sadasivan, PAP, March 24, 2009).

A similar framing can be observed in the statements referring to the Syrian civil war. While many politicians from Western democratic societies criticize Assad's dictatorial policies and his suppression of the Syrian democracy movement and hold Assad responsible for the civil war, no such criticism of Assad is found in parliamentary debates in Singapore. Just as the Singapore government does not criticize the government of Myanmar, it does not criticize the government of Syria. The diplomatic and cautious language expresses respect for Syria's sovereignty.

These statements reveal Singapore's underlying self-understanding and how it interprets international relations. National sovereignty and the principle of non-interference are key elements of how Singapore positions itself within the international community and are important characteristics of Singapore's identity relative to other nation-states. In contrast, human rights considerations do not play a role in its self-understanding. The emphasis on national self-determination and non-intervention in the affairs of other states certainly has to do with the fact that Singapore is a former colony, although this argument itself is not mentioned explicitly in the parliamentary debate. Colonialism was an intervention in foreign territories, but according to the colonizers' self-description, it was often legitimized by claiming to bring civilization and modernity to conquered territories. Against this historical background, some former colonies like Singapore have been suspicious of international treaties such as the Geneva Refugee Convention; they are interpreted as having a Western signature that opens the possibility of Western influence (Davies 2008; Chew 1994). Against this interpreted legacy of the historical past, it becomes understandable why Singapore did not sign the Geneva Convention nor its 1967 Protocol and has ratified only four of eighteen international human rights treaties (OHCHR 2022).

A dynamic economy based on human capital and not on natural resources: In addition to the national sovereignty frame, an *economic framing* of national identity plays

a major role in explaining the unwillingness to accept refugees on the one hand and to be open for specific groups of labor migrants on the other. Singapore hosts one of the largest immigrant populations in the world (relative to population size). And as the government's proposal in the White Paper demonstrates, Singapore even encourages immigration. It just does not want to admit refugees. Singapore is imagined as a society that has been enormously successful economically in the past and that must continue to develop further to compete successfully with other thriving economies, especially in Southeast Asia (such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea):

Many Asian cities are modernizing rapidly, and catching up on us. Singapore must continue to develop and upgrade to remain a key node in the network of global cities, a vibrant place where jobs and opportunities are created. A dynamic economy will provide us with more resources and room to pursue inclusive growth strategies to benefit all segments of our society. (Population White Paper 2013)

According to the government, the economic success of the country is mainly based on the ambition and skills of its population and a migration policy that admits only those immigrants whose human capital is needed. Singapore has no natural resources, such as oil. However, its population has high human capital, which must be nurtured because it is the crucial resource for Singapore's economic success: "Singaporeans cannot afford to be just here for the ride, passengers. We are not an oil state where citizens can live on the oil wealth and non-citizens do the work. For Singapore to thrive, we Singaporeans must always stay lean and hungry" (Lee Hsien Loong, PAP, February 8, 2013).

Since Singapore is framed as a country whose economic success is due to the excellent skills and the extraordinary motivation of its population, it requires immigrants who can contribute to this success with their human capital. However, refugees—assumed to bring no human capital—seemingly have no economic value.

An integrated multiethnic society: Singapore is not only portrayed as an economically very successful country but also as a society that has succeeded in integrating a multiethnic population. In defining Singapore's *cultural* identity, none of the speakers names a specific cultural feature considered typical for Singapore. Instead, heterogeneity in terms of languages, religions, and ethnicities is the core characteristic of Singapore:

Who are we? It is more complicated for us because we are a cosmopolitan city—unlike say Japan or China—where the population all look the same, speak the same language, and it is quite clear if you are Japanese, you are Japanese. But in Singapore, who are you? We have to be open, we have to be varied, we have to have all sorts of people here. (Lee Hsien Loong, PAP, February 8, 2013)

Diversity is considered not only to be a core feature of Singapore's contemporary society but is seen as a core component of its history and past, dating back to past migration processes:¹²

Who are we Singaporeans? Our forefathers came here from many lands, around the archipelago and further afield. Most Members would not have to go very far back in our own families to find somebody who came to Singapore from elsewhere and decided to sink roots here. They settled here, worked together for our future and, in the process, evolved a set of shared values that allowed us to unite and achieve peace and progress together. (Teo Chee Heen, PAP, February 8, 2013)

The real achievement of Singapore, however, is that it has succeeded in integrating the various ethnic groups and turning them into a community characterized by strong cohesion. This community is based on shared values, common experiences, and a feeling of belonging referred to as the "Singaporean core":

What is the Singapore core? . . . The Singapore core is really made up of people, of us. People who have our families and homes here; people who embrace our values, ideals, who have sunk roots here, who has given their loyalty to Singapore—for whom when you say the pledge, when you see the helicopter flying past National Day, it is a special moment. Many would have been living in the heartlands, been to school together. We will share memories and experiences. (Lee Hsien Loong, PAP, February 8, 2013)

However, the MPs of the ruling party agree that more immigrants could potentially harm the cohesion of an already diverse society. They argue that it is important to find a balance between the import of human capital through more migration and the degree of diversity in society. The deputy prime minister describes this balancing act very clearly when he says: "if we take in too many new immigrants, Singaporeans may increasingly feel like strangers in our own land." (Teo Chee Hean, PAP, February 8, 2013). The prime minister is also aware of the problem, as the following quote demonstrates:

So we need both that vibrancy and openness, but also the sense of identity and the sense of belonging among citizens that we are Singaporeans together. That is a very difficult combination to create—to be cohesive without being close, to identify with one another and not be xenophobic; to be open and yet not be diluted and dissolve. (Lee Hsien Loong, PAP, February 8, 2013)

¹² The government and members of the ruling PAP also establish a link between immigration and multiethnicity on the one hand and Singapore's economic success on the other. Because Singapore has no natural resources, its economic success is based solely on the hard work and skills of its citizens. Migrants have contributed decisively to Singapore's success with their skills.

What follows from this framing of the “we” is that more migrants, especially those interpreted to have no economic value, like refugees, are perceived as threatening Singapore’s cultural identity by upsetting the society’s multiethnic balance.

A community protected by a caring state: The government and the opposition embrace a communitarian conception of Singapore, wherein Singaporeans form a cohesive community in which citizens share a strong bond of solidarity despite their ethnic differences. Consequently, citizens have a particular *moral* obligation toward each other but not toward foreigners who do not belong to the community. This communitarian conception of the “we” implicitly deviates from a more Western model of society, as it’s not the individual who stands in the center but the community (Chua 2017: 60–63). It also differs from a communitarian conception that interprets a nation as linguistically or ethnically homogenous (such as Poland). In Singapore, the community is conceptualized as multiethnic, as we have shown earlier.

Closely related to this idea of communitarianism is the idea of the role of the state, which is conceived as a caring and wise authority that protects the community and its citizens. The state is portrayed as an institution that has foresight and makes wise decisions for its citizens based on scientific knowledge. The scientific-technocratic orientation of the state is evident in the style of language used in the parliamentary debates. MPs abstain from a populist tone and use data-oriented language by referring to numerical facts, calculations, and statistics, suggesting that the country’s well-being can be determined, like a company’s productivity, and calculated with the help of mathematical equations. Migrants are one parameter among others in this equation. The underlying idea is the concept of a state that knows what is good for the community of its citizens:

It has to be so and will always be so because the Government is elected by Singaporeans and responsible to Singaporeans . . . We have got to fulfil our duties as citizens, defend our country and fellow Singaporeans . . . If we retain this spirit and work together, we can create a much better tomorrow for our children. That is my promise to all Singaporeans. You are at the heart of all our policies. You are the reason why my team and I entered politics. To work for a better Singapore, to work for Singaporeans. And we want Singapore to do well so that Singaporeans can do well.
(Lee Hsien Loong, PAP, February 8, 2013)

The most important mission of the state is to protect the community of Singaporeans. This task is fulfilled when two goals are achieved, which are themselves central features of the definition of “we,” as we have seen: Ensuring the cohesion of a multiethnic society and creating economic prosperity for its citizens. Although Singapore sees itself as a dynamic capitalist market economy, the focus is always on the community, not the individual. Markets, capitalism, and meritocracy are not, per se, legitimate features of a society; they are only welcomed if they are good for the community. And the state has the responsibility to protect this community and to develop it economically:

I think I should make my position quite clear. We are not pursuing growth at all costs . . . Growth is not for its own sake. But growth is not unimportant. You need growth to improve education and healthcare, to build better homes and towns, to invest in reliable and convenient public transport. If we do not have the resources, you will not have the means and you will not have that quality of life. (Lee Hsien Loong, PAP, February 8, 2013)

However, it is important to emphasize that the state's moral responsibility only applies to the community of Singapore's citizens. A clear line is drawn between the "we" and the "others." This strict separation also means that the government has no responsibility for those who do not have citizenship status:

We defend Singapore and Singaporeans because we are the stakeholders of our country—our families, our homes and our futures are here. No foreigner can feel the same way. We may help to ensure the safety of foreigners who are here in times of conflict, but we are not defending their families or their futures. (Lee Hsien Loong, PAP, February 8, 2013)

3.3 Who are "they"? People without human capital who cannot contribute economically to Singapore

Other countries that reject asylum seekers, such as Poland, often assess refugees negatively and portray them as a security risk or as unsuitable with regard to their religious or cultural background. However, in the Singaporean debates, at first glance and on the surface of diplomatic language, refugees are positively interpreted.

The presumed humanitarian perspective: In their public statements, Singaporean politicians primarily refer to the *moral dimension* and view refugees from a humanitarian perspective. The Rohingya people's situation is described as a "human tragedy." In almost every meeting, MPs express their concern about the humanitarian situation in which the Rohingya find themselves in Myanmar and the refugee camps in Bangladesh. Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Foreign Affairs since 2015, describes his concerns about the situation in a refugee camp in Bangladesh with the following words: "whilst I have said that there are no quick fixes and that it takes time, it would be a tragedy for children to spend their entire childhood in such circumstances, be deprived of a full and proper education, and more importantly, prospects for a job and livelihood later on" (Vivian Balakrishnan, PAP, February 13, 2019).

MP Louis Ng Kok Kwang of the ruling PAP reports on a visit to a refugee camp in another debate:

What I saw and the stories I heard were heart-breaking. I know that there are various reasons for this crisis and there is no easy solution, as the Minister has mentioned; but I hope we remember that there are children involved in this, children who are

now fatherless, motherless, families who are torn apart. (Louis Ng Kok Kwang, PAP, January 9, 2017)

Framing Syrian refugees is similar to the Rohingya framing. All participants in the parliamentary debate express their deep sympathy toward the people affected by the Syrian civil war. Syrians are portrayed as people in dire need, as can be seen from the words of Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan: “Mdm Speaker, the on-going Syrian conflict is a tragedy. Over 220,000 Syrians have been killed. Four million have been forced to flee, and many millions more internally displaced. It does not appear that there will be any resolution soon. Our sympathies are with the Syrian people” (Vivian Balakrishnan, PAP, January 29, 2016).

However, this humanitarian framing of Rohingya and Syrian refugees only applies to those still in Myanmar or Syria or who have found shelter in another country, not those who attempt to come to Singapore. These refugees are classified differently and described as *illegal migrants* who attempt to break the law and are to be kept away from the territory of Singapore by all means, as we have seen above in the description of the refugee policy. Hence, the framing of refugees in the debates on Rohingya and Syrians breaks down into a public staging of refugees as people in need of humanitarian assistance on the one hand and as illegal migrants who may be punished with caning if they manage to reach Singapore’s territory on the other.

Migrants and refugees as human capital: As becomes evident in the debate on Singapore’s migration policy, all migrants, implicitly including refugees, are evaluated from an *economic* perspective as to whether they contribute to Singapore or not. The government proposes significantly increasing the number of immigrants to counter the demographic trend of an aging society. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong makes it very clear that immigrants are seen as instrumental to Singapore’s well-being:

Therefore, we are introducing the White Paper to look into the long-term interests of Singaporeans. We are not pursuing economic growth blindly, neither are we blindly growing the population. These are the means and not the end. Our eventual objective is to ensure that this generation and our future generations can continue to live happily and peacefully on this island. (Lee Hsien Loong, PAP, February 8, 2013)

Migrants are interpreted through an economic lens. They are evaluated from the standpoint of the human capital they bring and to what extent their human capital might contribute to the prosperity and the well-being of the Singaporean core population: “They build our homes, rail lines and roads, and clean our housing estates. They thus enable Singaporeans to enjoy good social and municipal services while moderating the cost of these services, contribute to our quality of life, and allow more Singaporeans themselves to be in the workforce” (Teo Chee Heen, PAP, February 8, 2013).

Following the logic of interpreting migrants in terms of their human capital, the Singaporean government distinguishes between two different groups of immigrants:

low-skilled and high-skilled workers. According to the government, Singapore's economy needs both groups, but they are treated differently. Low-skilled people can do the jobs that Singaporeans would not want to do themselves, for example, domestic care or construction work. Since unskilled labor is abundantly available in the global labor market, they can be treated as mere commodities:

They are here, they do a job, we are grateful to them, the job is done, they go home. Provided we can house them and transport them suitably and provided that the numbers do not cause problems in our housing estates or in our public transport. If we can manage that, this is a transient population. We are not expecting you to integrate. You are doing a job and we are grateful for what you are doing for us. (Lee Hsien Loong, PAP, February 8, 2013)

And when they no longer fit the needs of the Singaporean core, they can be discharged:

In a downturn or an economic slowdown, we can always tighten the work permits and Employment Passes to trim down the foreign workforce. It has happened during the downturn in 2001 and 2009 where foreign labour was significantly reduced then. I am sure the Government will again use this tool in similar circumstances so that citizen unemployment will be kept to the minimal. There is no point keeping the foreigners here if there are no jobs and also no jobs for Singaporeans. So, that would be a good buffer for us. (Liang Eng Hwa, PAP, February 5, 2012)

The situation is different for people with high skills. They should have the chance to attain permanent residence status because otherwise, Singapore will not be able to attract them to contribute to their workforce:

Chinese wisdom accumulated over thousands of years has taught us that accepting talent from all over the world is the way to build a strong nation. No matter which era we live in, no matter where we live, foreign immigrants, as long as they have the determination, can integrate into the society they migrate to and make contributions. We will consider carefully the number we would take in and how we would bring them in; we will make our policies more comprehensive, but our principles remain steadfast. I believe that in time to come, these people can become "true-blue Singaporeans" as well. (Lee Hsien Loong, PAP, February 8, 2013)

In sum, the general view of immigrants is that they have human capital that can be exploited for the benefit of Singapore. Although in the debate about refugees in general and Rohingya in particular, the framing as human capital is not used, one can conclude from the immigration discourse that the human capital perspective also applies to the interpretation of refugees, as all foreigners are interpreted primarily through an economic lens. They are evaluated from the standpoint of what human capital they might bring and to what extent their human capital might contribute to

the prosperity of Singapore's core population. From the government's but also the opposition parties' point of view, taking in refugees is out of the question, mainly because they are perceived as people with no human capital. If they did, it could be imagined that the government would consider accepting them as migrants, not as refugees. The government would then certainly weigh the benefits in terms of human capital against the harm to Singapore's cohesion. Only if the inflow of human capital were very high and could compensate for the harm in the social cohesion dimension could one imagine that the government would favor accepting refugees.

Other frames, especially a moral perspective based on humanitarian considerations, do not play a role at all in Singapore's discourse. Interestingly, cultural characteristics also do not matter in the classification and assessment of migrants, quite in contrast to Poland, for example, where refugees from Syria were rejected because they are Muslims, but refugees from neighboring Ukraine, a country with which Poland shares a common history, are accepted.

4. The positioning and framing of the opposition parties

4.1 Positioning: Closed doors for all refugees and a more restrictive policy toward migrant workers

The government and opposition parties agree completely on their refugee policy in that they both strictly reject admitting refugees. They also agree on the main principles of migration policy, as both camps argue that Singapore needs migrants for their human capital. However, while the government favors admitting more labor migrants, the opposition contests this policy. MPs from the Workers' Party and the Singapore People's Party oppose a further rise in immigrant admission rates. For example, Lina Chiam from SPP argues against the further intake of foreign workers and suggests that naturalization policies should also slow down: "Change has to start today. Our immigration policy must change more boldly. Conversion from foreigners to PR and later to Singaporeans must slow down further" (Lina Chiam, SPP, February 5, 2013).

To compensate for a future shortage of workers in the labor market, various proposals have been made. One is to increase the birth rate of the native population. For example, MP Muhamad Faisal Bin Abdul Manap makes the following suggestion: "On this matter, I would like to propose the Government to grant a housing grant of SGD 10,000 for the birth of the first child, SGD 15,000 for the birth of the second child and SGD 20,000 for the birth of the third child" (Muhamad Faisal Bin Abdul Manap, WP, February 4, 2013).

MP Sylvia Lim suggests that foreign spouses of Singaporean citizens already residing in Singapore could be naturalized, a policy she defines as a "Singaporean-friendly immigration" policy. Finally, all opposition MPs emphasize that the government is overestimating the future demand for migrant labor. Sylvia Lim, the leader of the Workers' Party asks the government the rhetorical question: "Next, do we really need a population of up to 6.9 million?" (Sylvia Lim, WP, February 4, 2013).

Given that the opposition is more cautious than the government about admitting labor migrants, it is not surprising that it also rejects admitting refugees, as their arguments against more migrants implicitly apply to refugees as well.

4.2 Who are “we”? A socially fair and less diverse community

MPs who voted against the government’s proposal to increase the number of immigrants agree with the government on the dimensions that make up Singapore’s identity, but they emphasize and weigh the various features differently. We discuss only the characteristics where the opposition parties’ framing differs from the government’s.

A multiethnic community under stress: Using a *cultural frame*, the opposition, like the government, emphasizes Singapore’s success in integrating a multiethnic society. In contrast to the government, however, the opposition emphasizes—much more strongly—that it is difficult to create a cohesive, multiethnic community. For this to succeed, people should be raised in Singapore and be familiarized with Singapore’s values through school, military service, and family. For example, the MP from SPP states:

Mdm Speaker, instant citizens can be Singaporean in name and have all citizenship rights, but for the Singapore core to be strong, the core must be strongly Singaporean in values, worldview, culture, sense of place and history, and network of friends and family. This can only be cultivated over time, in institutional settings, such as schooling, national service and community service. A strong Singaporean core should be made up of Singaporeans who grow up in and with Singapore. (Lina Chiam, SPP, February 5, 2013)

The opposition assumes that Singapore’s cohesion is always precarious and at risk because of the diversity of its population. Further admission of migrants would tip the balance and substantially endanger Singapore’s identity. This assumption is the most important reason why the opposition parties speak out against more migrants. The following MP from the Workers’ Party adds a further argument by emphasizing that, with an increase in migrants, the position of the Malay minority will be weakened, and Singapore’s precarious ethnic balance will shift: “Firstly, what are the steps or efforts that will be taken by the Government to maintain the balance in racial composition so that the proportion of Malays is not affected or does not decrease?” (Muhamad Faisal Bin Abdul Manap, WP, February 4, 2013).

A socially just and not only economically successful Singapore: As we have seen above, the government emphasizes Singapore’s economic success as an important feature of Singapore’s identity and that this success depends crucially on the work and dedication of its people and its human capital, as Singapore has no other resources. The opposition does not challenge this description. However, it criticizes the government for focusing exclusively on Singapore’s economic growth and neglecting

other aspects important to Singapore. Lina Chiam from the Singapore People's Party argues that the government should be more concerned about Singaporeans' quality of life instead of focusing on relentless economic growth: "I was hoping to see more relevant indicators of the quality of life, such as a survey of satisfaction with life among Singaporeans. But no such measures seem to be used" (Lina Chiam, SPP, February 5, 2013).

Sylvia Lim from the Workers' Party makes a similar point: "The Workers' Party does not endorse proceeding headlong onto the Government's suggested path. Underlying its plan is that the population injections of that magnitude are required for a dynamic economy. The proposal has severe ramifications. First, the economy is but one aspect of the nation's quality of life" (Sylvia Lim, WP, February 5, 2013).

The opposition envisions Singapore not only as an economically successful country but also demands a more socially just and fair society. It asserts that housing is too expensive and scarce and that wages are too low or have not increased:

In conclusion, the Singapore People's Party is most concerned that there seems to be no new substantive initiatives in this White Paper to address Singaporeans' most pressing problems like negative real median wage increase over the last five years, and the relentless rise in the cost of living, particularly for basic goods and services. There is just the same old measures, like life-long upgrading, Workfare, job-matching and placement programs. For whom is the White Paper? It does not address these concerns of low-income Singaporeans. (Lina Chiam, SPP, February 5, 2013)

The Workers' Party argues in a similar way:

However, Singaporeans today face a widening income gap, a rising cost of living, increased social friction, unhappiness at the direction this country is taking, worried about their employment prospects. Singapore ranks consistently near to the top in any international benchmark on GDP per capita but sadly, many people do not seem to be happy. (Muhamad Faisal Bin Abdul Manap, WP, February 4, 2013)

Underlying the criticism of the government's policies is a particular vision of a desired Singapore. Singapore should not only be economically successful but also be socially just and improve the quality of life for its citizens in addition to economic prosperity. Hence, opposition parties favor a more social democratic model of Singapore in contrast to the government's more liberal economic vision. The opposition parties share the idea of a caring and wise state with the government. However, they accentuate the tasks of the state differently. In addition to enabling economic success, the state should be more concerned with social justice and care more about the cohesion of Singapore's society. No increase in the number of migrants can help to fulfill this task.

4.3 Who are “they”? A threat to social cohesion and competitors for scarce resources

As we have seen, the government portrays migrants as a commodity and human capital that Singapore needs to continue its economic success. Opposition parties share this view but go beyond this framing as they see increasing migrants as a double threat.

Migrants as a cultural threat: In *cultural* terms, labor migrants are assumed to threaten Singapore’s national identity. As migrants did not grow up in Singapore, they do not share the values typical of the country. The government also sees migrants as a potential threat to Singapore’s cohesion, but the opposition parties place less emphasis on the economic benefits of more migrants and emphasize the negative consequences for Singapore’s social cohesion, which they see threatened by more migrants. They assume that too many immigrants would dilute feelings of belonging and patriotism among native Singaporeans: “Why defend a country where so many of its residents can leave if they wish?” (Lina Chiam, SPP, February 5, 2013). Interestingly, the portrayal of immigrants as cultural threat does not refer to specific characteristics, such as religion or ethnicity. This portrayal distinguishes the debate from that in other countries with a restrictive refugee policy, such as Poland.

Migrants as a social-economic threat: Opposition parties frame immigrants as competitors to the native population. As the country’s land resources are limited, more immigrants will worsen the housing situation: “What about land resources? The implications of planning for 6.9 million on our land use are instructive and worrying. If we follow the White Paper proposal, the land use data prepared by the Ministry of National Development shows how little room we would have left to move” (Sylvia Lim, WP, February 5, 2013).

In addition, migrants are assumed to put competitive pressure on the job market: “Even right now, many are wondering why they should sacrifice two years of their lives, and in subsequent reservist cycles, only to be beaten in the job search by foreigners” (Lina Chiam, SSP, February 5, 2013).

Finally, foreign workers are seen as a further burden on the already struggling welfare system of the country: “immigrants grow old and consume public services as well, adding to the burden of the national budget. Who will support them when they grow old?” (Sylvia Lim, WP, February 4, 2013).

In summary, our analysis demonstrates that the opposition parties weigh the characteristics of a Singaporean identity differently than the government. Whereas the government strongly emphasizes Singapore’s economic “we,” the opposition stresses much more the communitarian “we.” Furthermore, both camps view migrants as pure human capital that can be exploited for the benefit of Singapore. The opposition parties, however, portray migrants as a threat to Singapore’s multiracial balanced identity—without mentioning specific cultural characteristics of immigrants—and as competitors to native Singaporeans for scarce resources (labor and housing). The two different accentuations of the “we” and the “others” subsequently lead to different policy conclusions. While the government, out of necessity and for

economic reasons, favors increasing the number of migrants, the opposition parties reject this stance because they see community cohesion at risk.

Transferring the frames reconstructed from the discourse on migration to the interpretation of refugees, it seems plausible to assume that the opposition parties' rejection of refugees is even more pronounced than that of the government. Both the government and the opposition parties strictly reject admitting refugees because Singapore does not feel bound by international law and human rights and insists on the country's self-determination. Both camps do not distinguish between refugees and immigrants; they evaluate all foreigners from the standpoint of the human capital and wealth they bring and to what extent their human capital might contribute to the prosperity of Singapore's core population. Refugees are implicitly interpreted in this cost-benefit equation as people unlikely to bring benefit to Singapore, which is why they are rejected. The analysis of the migration discourse reveals that opposition parties' rejection of refugees is likely even more pronounced because they interpret Singapore's cohesion as precarious and foreigners as a cultural and socioeconomic threat.

5. Summary and accounting for differences between political parties

Table 9.2 summarizes the results of our frame analysis. While in the other country chapters, we summarized the results for the government and the opposition parties separately, in the case of Singapore, it is unnecessary because both camps are close to each other.

The fact that the government and the opposition parties are so close to each other also means that in the case of Singapore, there is no need for a detailed analysis of the political cleavage structure of the country and how it impacts policy and framing differences between different political parties. In Singapore, the ruling party has succeeded in keeping all opposition parties small and ineffectual. This dominance can partly be attributed to the government having limited the opposition parties' ability to organize and mobilize. At the same time, the ruling party's undoubted success has enabled it to rally the citizens and the various population groups behind it. This popularity, in turn, has made it difficult for the opposition parties to develop a profile of their own. The social democratic Workers' Party—the oldest and strongest opposition party in Singapore—agrees with the governing People's Action Party on major policy issues. It sees its role less as an alternative to the PAP than as a “check and balance” of the government. The agreement between the government and the Workers' Party is also evident in the refugee policy and, to a large extent, the migration policy. Regarding admitting labor migrants, the Workers' Party advocates a more restrictive policy than the government because it interprets migrants as a socioeconomic and cultural threat. However, both parties agree on the key dimensions of framing Singaporean identity and foreigners, even if the WP emphasizes some dimensions differently.

Table 9.2 Positionings and framings in the debate on the admission of refugees in Singapore

Policy position	No admission of refugees at all. Immigrants are admitted if they are useful for improving Singapore's prosperity	
Framing	Who are "we"?	Who are "they"?
International	The principles of sovereignty of states and of non-interference in internal affairs are core features of Singapore's postcolonial identity	—
Economic	Singapore is an extremely successful country, whose success is solely based on the skills of its people	Refugees and migrants are seen as a human capital and commodity; only those who bring in skills and wealth will be admitted. Refugees do not bear human capital (Opposition parties additionally regard immigrants and refugees as an economic threat to the native population.)
Cultural	Singapore is a multiethnic society; this diversity is always precarious (The opposition emphasizes more strongly that a multiethnic society is precarious)	Refugees and migrants might threaten Singapore's multiracial identity (This framing is used almost exclusively by opposition parties)
Moral	Singapore is a community of solidarity. Government and citizens have a strong moral obligation to protect the Singaporean "core"	Compassion for refugees as long as they are outside Singapore
Legal	—	Illegal migrants
Security	—	—

It is worth mentioning that the Workers' Party differs in its ideological profile from social democratic parties in other countries. In many European social democratic parties, there is a conflict within the party between two camps, whereby the old left represents the socially disadvantaged groups of a specific nation-state, excluding those who do not hold a country's citizenship. In contrast, the new left has more of an international orientation; it interprets itself as representing the socially disadvantaged people, but this is independent of whether these are citizens, foreigners, or immigrants. Accordingly, the international and cosmopolitan wing of social democratic parties is also the one that firmly favors accepting refugees. As our analysis has demonstrated, the Workers' Party in Singapore lacks this international orientation and is only concerned about the welfare of Singapore's own citizens. Consequently, no actor in Singapore advocates for refugees or the rights of migrant workers.

6. Appendix

Table 9.3 Overview of sampled plenary debates and Q&A sessions in the parliament of Singapore

Date	Public forum	Topic	Speaker	Party affiliation
March 24, 2009	Q&A session in Parliament	Admission of Rohingya refugees	Eunice Elizabeth Olsen	Nominated
			Halimah Jacob	PAP
			Balaji Sadasivan (Senior Minister of State, Ministry of Foreign Affairs)	PAP
January 2013	—	Population White Paper	National Population and Talent Division, Prime Minister's Office	—
February 4, 2013	Plenary debate in Parliament	Population White Paper	Teo Chee Hean (Deputy Prime Minister and Coordinating Minister for National Security and Minister for Home Affairs)	PAP
			Sylvia Lim	Workers' Party
			Muhamad Faisal Bin Abdul Manap	Workers' Party
February 5, 2013	Plenary debate in Parliament	Population White Paper	Liang Eng Hwa	PAP
			Teo Siong Seng	Nominated
			Lina Chiam	SPP Non-Constituency Member
February 8, 2013	Plenary debate in Parliament	Population White Paper	Lee Hsien Loong (Prime Minister)	PAP
April 14, 2014	Q&A session in Parliament	Situation of Rohingya in Myanmar	Lim Wee Kiak	PAP
			Kasiviswanathan Shanmugam (Minister for Foreign Affairs)	PAP
July 13, 2015	Q&A session in Parliament	Human trafficking in ASEAN	Christopher de Souza	PAP
			Kasiviswanathan Shanmugam (Minister for Foreign Affairs)	PAP

Continued

Table 9.3 *Continued*

Date	Public forum	Topic	Speaker	Party affiliation
January 9, 2017	Q&A session in Parliament	Refugee crisis in Myanmar	Louis Ng Kok Kwang	PAP
			Muhamad Faisal Bin Abdul	Workers' Party
			Pritam Singh	Workers' Party
			Vivian Balakrishnan (Minister for Foreign Affairs)	PAP
January 9, 2017	Q&A session in Parliament	Refugee crisis in Myanmar	Christopher de Souza	PAP
			Vivian Balakrishnan (Minister for Foreign Affairs)	PAP
October 2, 2017	Q&A session in Parliament	Situation in Rakhine State	Intan Azura Mokhtar	PAP
			Christopher de Souza	PAP
			Vivian Balakrishnan (Minister for Foreign Affairs)	PAP
October 3, 2017	Q&A session in Parliament	Situation in Rakhine State	Louis Ng Kok Kwang	PAP
			Pritam Singh	Workers' Party
			Vivian Balakrishnan (Minister for Foreign Affairs)	PAP
November 19, 2018	Q&A session in Parliament	Review of foreign policy	Christopher de Souza	PAP
			Ang Wei Neng	PAP
			Louis Ng Kok Kwang	PAP
			Vivian Balakrishnan (Minister for Foreign Affairs)	PAP
February 13, 2019	Q&A session in Parliament	Repatriation of Rohingya refugees	Anthea Ong	Nominated
			Louis Ng Kok Kwang	PAP
			Vikram Nair	PAP
			Vivian Balakrishnan (Minister for Foreign Affairs)	PAP
July 8, 2019	Q&A session in Parliament	Rohingya issue at the ASEAN meeting	Anthea Ong	Nominated
			Vivian Balakrishnan (Minister for Foreign Affairs)	PAP

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PART IV
CONCLUSION

The liberal script on refugee admission and the significance of national cultural repertoires

Our study, the results of which we presented in the preceding chapters, was conducted as part of a research consortium known as the Cluster of Excellence “Contestations of the Liberal Script” (SCRIPTS). SCRIPTS was established in recognition that liberal ideas and institutions are increasingly under fire (Börzel & Zürn 2020) and analyzes contemporary controversies about the liberal order from a historical, global, and comparative perspective.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, future prospects of the liberal model looked promising. Many scholars and politicians believed that the fall of the Berlin Wall indicated the liberal model’s definitive victory. The American political scientist Francis Fukuyama (1992) even argued that history had come to its end, as liberal values would prevail all over the world. More than thirty years later, we know that things have turned out differently. The liberal model is by no means uncontroversial and subject to multiple challenges. To name just a few: China’s enormous economic success over the past decades shows impressively that economic modernization can be achieved by other means than the liberal model. Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine demonstrates how little international law and liberal principles, such as the prohibition of waging war against a sovereign state, are necessarily respected by a major superpower. The return to power by the Taliban in Afghanistan and the withdrawal of Western troops can be seen as a failure to institutionalize democracy and liberal values, including equal rights for women. Furthermore, some liberal democracies such as Hungary, Poland, and India have moved toward autocratic regimes, and many others are internally challenged by right-wing populist movements and parties.

One key area in which the liberal script is under pressure is the question of admitting refugees. We argue in Section 1 of this concluding chapter that the duty of admitting refugees fleeing war and persecution is a core component of the liberal script, as this is the last resort for protecting the right to individual self-determination in a world of sovereign nation-states. We show that this obligation is not only well justified in liberal political theory but also inscribed in what, following world society theory, can be described as a contemporary “world culture.” Its core principles

became enshrined in international law after World War II, exemplified by such international treaties as the 1951 Refugee Convention.¹

However, the rapidly rising number of refugees and asylum seekers in recent years has put the liberal script regarding refugee admission to the test. To what extent are countries across the world willing to adhere to the liberal script and admit refugees seeking entry? Contrary to what enthusiasts about the spread of liberal values would have expected in the 1990s, the liberal script seems to play only a minor (albeit not entirely insignificant) role in understanding refugee admission worldwide. As we point out in Section 2, governments and opposition parties in the countries of our analysis only rarely refer to liberal principles and international law when debating whether to admit refugees (one exception is Germany). Moreover, the least liberal countries in our analysis—Uganda and Turkey—seem to be the most “open” in terms of admitting refugees.

So, if it is not the degree of adherence to (or rejection of) the liberal script that helps make sense of the countries’ different responses to the admitting of refugees, what is it? In Section 3, we summarize the main argument of our study. We are skeptical about theories of cross-national convergence, be it toward the “liberal script” as suggested by world society theory, or a restrictive stance, as suggested by securitization theory, which diagnoses a global movement toward increasingly restrictive migration policy. Instead, we argue that nation-states and country-specific characteristics remain essential factors for understanding the refugee policies of different countries. We are also skeptical that “objective” characteristics of nation-states, such as the level of unemployment in a country or ethnic similarity between refugees and the population of the host country, directly explain refugee policies. Instead, we argue that political actors interpret those factors in different ways, suggesting that a process of framing mediates the impact of these variables on a country’s refugee policy.

Our key argument states that governments’ position on whether a country accepts refugees is related to how they frame the characteristics of the host society’s identity—the “we”—on the one hand and the refugees as “others” on the other. Furthermore, the national context and the way political actors frame the “we” and the “others” are also important for understanding the patterns of political conflict over admitting refugees within countries. Many social scientists suggest that conflicts over admitting refugees tend to follow a universal cleavage between “cosmopolitans,” who support admitting refugees, and “communitarians,” exemplified by right-wing populist parties, who oppose admitting refugees. Our results show that debates on admitting refugees rather follow country-specific cleavage structures. Again, the national “container” seems to continue to bear significance for understanding political conflicts surrounding refugee admissions.

¹ Michael Zürn and Johannes Gerschewski (2021) define the various elements of the liberal script from the perspective of our research cluster.

1. The liberal script on admitting refugees

The duty to admit refugees is a key component of the liberal script.² In this section, we first draw on political theory to show how the duty to admit refugees is normatively justified from the perspective of liberalism. Next, we follow world society theory to argue descriptively that the liberal script of refugee admissions is also anchored in contemporary world culture and institutionalized in international law after World War II. Taken together, we argue that accepting refugees is normatively required from the perspective of liberal political philosophy and, at the same time, empirically anchored in the script of the world society.

The question of whether states have a duty to admit refugees is part and parcel of the question of whether states have a right to control their borders. There is a lively debate in liberal political philosophy on the legitimacy of national borders and the right of the state to decide who can cross its borders versus the right of individuals to move and migrate to where they wish (overviews in, e.g., [Hosein 2019](#); [Wellman 2015](#); [Bauböck 2020](#)). It is not our purpose to review this debate in detail but to briefly point out the key principles that guide it. The core element of liberal thought is the principle of individual self-determination, frequently also referred to as individual autonomy, freedom, or liberty ([Gaus et al. 2018](#); [Fisch 2015](#); [Zürn & Gerschewski 2021](#)). Individual self-determination means that the individual is conceived as an autonomous actor endowed with the volitional capacity to decide on their own life and destiny. The freedom to move is an essential element of individual self-determination. It implies the freedom to leave a particular country and go somewhere else without arbitrary interference.³ This freedom to move is particularly important if risks to bodily integrity and fundamental freedoms force people to leave their country, as is the case for refugees.

However, individual self-determination also includes the freedom to associate with others and constitute a community. The community then earns the right to collective self-determination deriving from the right to individual self-determination. Its members are free to determine the character of that community, including the right to refuse to associate with others and decide who can become a member and who cannot.⁴ This thought can be applied to nation-states as well. According to liberal thought, a democratic state—one based on the will of its citizens—is legitimized to

² We have elaborated on the following considerations in more detail elsewhere ([Drewski & Gerhards 2020](#)).

³ As Joseph H. Carens argues: “Every reason why one might want to move within a state may also be a reason for moving between states. One might want a job; one might fall in love with someone from another country; one might belong to a religion that has few adherents in one’s native state and many in another; one might wish to pursue cultural opportunities that are only available in another land” ([Carens 2013](#): 239).

⁴ As Christopher Wellman puts it: “Just as an individual has a right to determine whom (if anyone) he or she would like to marry, a group of fellow citizens has a right to determine whom (if anyone) it would like to invite into its political community. And just as an individual’s freedom of association entitles one to remain single, a state’s freedom of association entitles it to exclude all foreigners from its political community”

decide on its own affairs without outside interference. Consequently, the principle of collective self-determination suggests that the state has the right to deny people access to its territory.⁵

It follows from the preceding remarks that from the perspective of liberalism, there is an inherent tension between the sovereignty and self-determination of nation-states and the rights of migrants and refugees. Whereas the principle of individual self-determination provides support for open borders, the principles of collective self-determination and national sovereignty imply that nation-states have the right to close their borders. Thus, liberal thought cannot be characterized as prescribing open borders per se. The individual right to cross the border and access a country must be balanced with the receiving state's right to control its borders. The crucial question is how to weigh the principles of individual and collective self-determination. In this respect, liberal thinking makes a difference between "forced migrants" (refugees and asylum seekers), i.e., those fleeing from persecution and serious human rights violations, and "voluntary" migrants, i.e., those moving in search of better opportunities or for other reasons. Undoubtedly, the distinction between the two groups is anything but clear in "real" life, as Rebecca Hamlin (2021) and others (e.g., Faist 2018) have shown. Our study also demonstrates that classifying "refugees" as "migrants" is a strategy often used by politicians to justify closing borders. Philosophical debates, however, are less about real phenomena than ideal types and the question of how to justify, with reference to general values, why the state should admit certain people and may reject others.

With regard to voluntary migrants, we find philosophical positions defending the right of the state to control its borders and refusing immigrants access to its territory (e.g., Walzer 1983; Wellman 2008; Miller 2007, 2016), as well as positions justifying the right of individuals to have access to other countries (e.g., Carens 2013; Abizadeh 2008). Essentially, those advocating the right of the state to control its borders refer to the argument mentioned earlier, namely that every free association has the right to decide its own concerns, including the decision on new members. In contrast, those who stand up for an open border policy put forward two arguments supporting their position. Individual self-determination includes the right to move freely, even across national borders. In addition, advocates of global freedom of movement claim that the way the world is organized is fundamentally unjust (Carens 2013;

(Wellman 2008: 110–111). A similar argument is put forward by Michael Walzer, who compares nation-states to clubs that can define who can become a member (Walzer 1983).

⁵ It should be pointed out that some scholars question the argument that the right to collective self-determination automatically implies the right to exclude nonmembers of a collective. The counterargument reads as follows (Benhabib 2004; Abizadeh 2008): The core idea of democratic self-determination means that all persons who are affected by political decisions must have the opportunity to participate in the process of decision making e.g., by electing those who make the decisions. If members of a community like citizens of a state decide democratically to close the borders, then this decision will not only affect members, but also nonmembers of a community like immigrants and refugees, as they are no longer allowed to enter the specific country. This, however, contradicts the idea that everyone affected by a decision should also have a say in it, which in turn leads to the conclusion that "according to democratic theory, the democratic justification for a regime of border control is ultimately owed to both members and nonmembers" (Abizadeh 2008: 44).

Shachar 2009). Citizens born in a poor country in the Global South have significantly fewer life opportunities than citizens born in a rich country in the Global North. One's country of birth, however, is determined by chance, not by choice, personal effort, or achievements. This fact, in turn, violates the principle that all human beings are born equal and should enjoy the same opportunities. Hence, the right to migrate to another country should be guaranteed to realize the idea of equal opportunities.

From the perspective of liberalism, refugees forced to flee from their homes because of persecution, war, or other causes have different rights than voluntary migrants. Here, we find consensus on the position that the individual right to be protected from persecution and bodily harm trumps any state's right to control access to its territory. The normative point of reference for this position is the individual's right to life. Survival is considered a necessary prerequisite to realizing individual self-determination. Consequently, the right to survival also trumps the right of a group to decide on new members. Hence, a group's right to collective self-determination is secondary if the lives of people asking for admission are threatened. While there is consensus on this principle within the philosophical debate, there are different opinions on questions of how exactly to define a refugee, which countries should take in how many refugees, and, above all, which conditions must be met for the principle to be applied (Singer & Singer 2010; Carens 2013; Miller 2016; Gibney 2018).⁶

The idea that the right of refugees to flee to another country should have priority over that country's right to close its borders is a well-founded position in liberal political philosophy. After World War II, this idea also found its way into international human rights and refugee law. We interpret this as part and parcel of the institutionalization of a "world society script" as described by the Stanford School of sociological neo-institutionalism. A script consists of ideas of how a society should be organized and is not a description of how a society is organized. It contains a "shared and binding set of rules exogenous to any given society and located not only in individual or elite sentiments but also in many world institutions such as the United Nations" (Meyer 1980: 117). Although the present world society script originates in Europe and is strongly influenced by liberal and Enlightenment ideas, it has spread worldwide over time, especially after World War II. It is promoted by international organizations, like the different agencies of the UN, international courts, nongovernmental organizations, consultants, and scientists at the global level, and has been institutionalized in international law and agreements.

⁶ David Miller defines the following criteria: (1) The lives and fundamental rights of the persons requesting admission must be threatened in the country of origin. (2) The state of the country of origin is the originator of the threat or is not able to protect the people. (3) There is no other way to protect those seeking refuge (e.g., international aid or safe zones within the country of origin). (4) The host state is capable of accepting refugees in the first place (Miller 2016: 76–93). Of course, the four conditions are not easy to determine empirically. Above all, there is a debate in the literature about what exactly threat and persecution mean and whether, for example, fleeing hunger or a natural disaster is a plausible reason for obtaining refugee status. Those who support a more restrictive definition of the reasons for admitting refugees argue that in the case of hunger and natural disasters, people can be helped by international aid, even within their own countries. And if that is the case, states are not obligated to take in refugees.

Part of the script is the definition of legitimate actorhood. From the perspective of sociological neo-institutionalism, actorhood is not naturally given but the result of a historical process of cultural construction (Meyer 2010; Meyer et al. 1997; Meyer & Jepperson 2000). In addition to organizations, NGOs, and professionals, two types of actors are defined as particularly significant. On the one hand, nation-states are legitimized as the main form of organizing societies and codified as the fundamental building blocks of world society. According to Article 2 (1) of the Charter of the United Nations, states enjoy “sovereign equality” (United Nations 1945). This clause means that independent of their size and power, each state is a juridical person, recognized as equal in the international realm, and has full authority over its territory and domestic affairs. Even though this is not explicitly codified in international law, the principle of national sovereignty implies that the state also has full authority over its borders and can decide whether it admits nonnationals to its territory or not.

On the other hand, however, the script of how societies and the world polity should be organized grants a special role not only to states but also to individuals (Meyer et al. 1997; Soysal 1994; Elliott 2007). It conceptualizes individuals as sacred and endowed with inviolable rights (Meyer & Jepperson 2000: 105). In this regard, Meyer speaks of an “ontology of constructing the person as primordial actor” (Meyer 2010: 8). According to this script, every individual has the right to individual self-determination by virtue of their nature as human beings. No one else is legitimized to determine an individual’s destiny. Similar to how territorial integrity and sovereignty of nation-states are codified and protected by international law, the rights of individuals are codified by a variety of treaties. Central in this regard is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) from 1948. For the first time in human history, this Declaration defined the rights and freedoms to which every human being is equally and inalienably entitled. Article 1 of the Declaration reads accordingly: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (United Nations 1948). Every person is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration.

These two ideas of legitimate actorhood may come into tension with each other when it comes to the question of border control and migration, as the principles of national sovereignty and the universal human rights of migrants and refugees have to be weighed against each other. World society theory argues, however, that over the course of recent decades, there has been a shift in priorities between the two principles insofar as the rights of individuals have been strengthened and those of the state weakened.⁷ The period after World War II was a decisive turning point in this respect. The experience of excessive nationalist war-making and

⁷ Yasemin Soysal (1994), for example, argues that the spread of international human rights norms pushed by international treaties, institutions, and nongovernmental organizations has led to an expansion of the rights of migrants that increasingly constrain national sovereignty. Michael Elliott (2007) has systematically coded all human rights documents signed by the majority of countries since the 1940s to gain information on how the rights of individuals are codified in international documents. Results indicate that the number of human rights documents increased steadily in the 1980s and increased even further after 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Other studies demonstrate that the group of people who

the Holocaust led to a delegitimization of nationalism and a corresponding weakening of the principle of national sovereignty on the one hand and an expansion of the rights of individuals on the other (Meyer 2010: 6). This is especially true for the idea that individuals persecuted by their state need to be protected and taken in by other countries, an idea that found its way into international law with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and the Geneva Convention of Refugees in 1951.⁸

Both treaties are milestones in the historical development of protecting the individual from arbitrary state rule. As Peter Gatrell (2013) argued, the “new” definition of a refugee represented a departure from the pre-war doctrine whereby protection was offered to a specific group rather than a persecuted individual. Accordingly, Article 14 (1) of the UDHR grants every person the right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution. Furthermore, by signing the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, state parties commit to three fundamental principles that considerably limit their ability to close their borders to refugees and asylum seekers: non-refoulement, non-penalization, and nondiscrimination (UNHCR 1951). First, the principle of non-refoulement means that states are not allowed to return or “refouler” refugees and asylum seekers “to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened” (Article 33(1)). Second, the principle of non-penalization takes account of the fact that refugees and asylum seekers may have to seek irregular ways to enter a country (Article 31). Hence, they are not to be prosecuted for illegal entry. Finally, the principle of nondiscrimination holds that the provisions of the Refugee Convention shall be applied without discrimination based on race, religion, nationality, or other grounds (Article 3).⁹

Let us briefly summarize our considerations. When people’s lives are threatened in their home country, and they seek refuge in another, it raises the question of whether

are conceptualized as individuals and who are entitled to rights has increased over time, including children, indigenous people, persons living with disabilities, people of all ethnic groups, and those with diverse sexual identities (Boli-Bennett & Meyer 1978; Schofer & Meyer 2005; Elliot 2007; Koenig 2008).

⁸ The two world wars had led to the displacement and flight of millions of people who wandered homeless through Europe. In addition, the Nazi regime killed, persecuted and forced Jews into exile by making life unbearable for them. Many were unable to find countries willing to take them in.

⁹ The definition of “refugee” in the Geneva Convention is rather narrow in two respects. First, it does not grant the right to asylum, which remains a prerogative of the state; it merely requires states not to push back refugees and asylum seekers to places where their lives may be at risk. This definition allows states to continue paying lip service to refugee rights and trying to eschew their obligations under international law by hindering refugees from actually reaching their territories. In fact, this is a widespread practice (FitzGerald 2019). For example, states often require shipping and airline companies to control passengers’ visas at the point of departure; this makes it impossible for asylum seekers—who may not have valid visas—to embark. Second, it includes only those in the refugee definition who flee from political persecution but excludes those whose lives are threatened by other circumstances, such as famine, extreme poverty, or natural disasters. Attempts to expand a minimalist definition of refugees have been partially successful. The first organization to do so was the Organization of African Unity (OAU), with its 1969 Refugee Convention, followed by the Cartagena Declaration of Latin American states in 1984. The OAU Refugee Convention extends the refugee definition to cover those who flee from “external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality” (UNHCR 1969: Article 1(2)). The EU, in turn, has introduced the notion of “subsidiary protection,” which grants protection to those who face the death penalty, torture or degrading treatment, or life-threatening indiscriminate violence in their countries of origin (Directive 2011/95/EU Article 15).

nation-states have the legitimate authority to close their borders or whether they have an obligation to accept these people into their territories. Answers to this question can be found both in the philosophical debate and sociological studies that have conceptually and empirically determined the normative foundations of modern liberal societies. While philosophy justifies its position with normative arguments, sociology supports its position with empirical evidence. Both describe the initial question as a tension between the state's right to collective self-determination and the freedom of individuals. According to liberal thought, the individual right to be protected from persecution and serious human rights violations trumps any state's right to control access to its territory, as the right to survival is seen as a basic prerequisite for all other rights. According to the world society theory, the modern script grants two actors equally legitimate actorhood: states and individuals. However, empirical studies show that the rights of individuals have become more and more important over time, and those of the state have been restricted. This trend includes the protection of refugees and the obligation of states to admit refugees, an idea codified as binding in international law after World War II. According to the Geneva Convention, states are not allowed to "refouler" refugees and asylum seekers.

2. Can adherence to the liberal script account for refugee policies and discourse across countries?

Both enthusiastic supporters of liberalism (e.g., [Fukuyama 1992](#)) and social scientists from the Stanford School hypothesized that, beginning from the "West," the liberal script would spread worldwide. Given that the rights of refugees are codified in international law, and the relevant treaties have been signed by nearly all nation-states in the world, one could have expected that they significantly shape policies and public discourse so that different countries treat refugees in a very similar way and that arguments exchanged in public discourse reflect the norms and principles of international law. At the very least, one might have expected that those countries that can be classified as "liberal" would practice a more open refugee policy and be more guided by liberal principles in their discourse than authoritarian societies. One of the main findings of our study is that neither the policies nor the frames used in public discourse have met this expectation.

A uniform or similar reaction of the six countries of our analysis to refugee crises could not be identified. Instead, governments responded very differently to the respective refugee crises in their neighborhoods. The spectrum ranges from Uganda's refugee-friendly open-door policy, to that of Singapore, which does not accept refugees at all. The countries in our sample differ in terms of their political regime. Some of them can be classified as liberal democracies, others more as authoritarian regimes. According to the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index, which scores countries on such criteria as equality before the law and individual liberties, as well as judicial and legislative constraints on the executive ([Varieties of Democracy 2022](#)), the most "liberal" countries in our analysis are Germany, followed by

Chile and Poland (with a decline over time). Leaning toward the illiberal pole are Singapore, Uganda, and Turkey (also with a significant decline) (see Table 3.1 in Chapter 3). Given that the liberal script prescribes the admission of and nondiscrimination between refugees, one could have expected liberal democracies to be more open to admitting refugees than other types of regimes. Although our study is not quantitative and, therefore, could not systematically test this relationship, it is striking that some of the most illiberal regimes in our sample are, at the same time, the most open toward admitting refugees. This finding indicates that the refugee policies of our countries do not follow the liberal–illiberal rank order.

One of the least liberal countries in our sample, Uganda, pursues the most open refugee policy. Hosting about 1.5 million refugees, Uganda takes in the largest number of refugees of all African countries and ranks among the top countries worldwide in terms of refugee hosting. Uganda signed the main international treaties concerning refugees and complies with the law in practice, as it does not deny any refugee access to its territory or distinguish between refugees from different ethnic or religious backgrounds. Most of the refugees are immediately recognized as refugees on the basis of their country of origin. The open refugee policy of the government is supported by the opposition.

Likewise, authoritarian Turkey, under the leadership of the AKP, leans closer to the open pole in terms of its refugee policy. President Erdoğan opened Turkey's borders to refugees from Syria. With about 3.5 million refugees, Turkey hosts, by far, the largest number of refugees from Syria. However, it must be said that Syrian refugees in Turkey do not fall under international refugee law but under a specially created “Temporary Protection Regulation,” which has the advantage that all Syrians are admitted without a case-by-case examination, but at the same time, enables the government to revoke the protection status at its discretion (Abdelaaty 2021).

Next in terms of openness comes Germany, the most liberal democracy in our sample. Like the authoritarian Turkish government, the German government pursued an open refugee policy with regard to Syrian refugees. It temporarily suspended the application of the Dublin Regulation for Syrians and decided to leave Germany's borders open to refugees traveling via Hungary. By 2020, Germany admitted around one million refugees, mainly from Syria. However, after this initial period of openness, the German government introduced several restrictions, which made it more difficult for refugees to reach Germany. Most importantly, and on Germany's initiative, the EU signed an agreement with Turkey to prevent further refugees from leaving Turkey to come to the EU.

Following Germany, Chile is the second most liberal democracy in our sample. As of 2022, Chile hosts around 444,000 Venezuelans. Its conservative government granted Venezuelan citizens entry to and temporary residence in Chile for a period of up to two years. However, Chile's refugee policy turns out to be less open on closer inspection. The special visa stops short of granting displaced Venezuelans refugee protection according to international law. In addition, applicants must fulfill several conditions, such as presenting a passport, a clean criminal record, and paying a fee—all of which led to the selection of certain refugees and the exclusion of others.

Although Poland had witnessed a decline in the quality of its democracy in recent years, it still belongs to the group of liberal societies. Like Germany, Poland faced pressure to admit refugees from Syria as an EU member state. But unlike Germany, the PiS government (until 2023) consistently refused to admit refugees from Syria and declined to participate in a refugee relocation mechanism proposed by the EU. Poland has hosted virtually no refugees from Syria. However, the government admitted refugees from neighboring Ukraine on a large scale after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. According to international refugee law, whose treaties were signed by Poland, discrimination between different groups is not allowed because it contradicts the liberal idea that all people have an equal right to protection.

Finally, much like Uganda and Turkey, Singapore cannot be classified as a liberal democracy, even though it scores higher on the V-Dem index. But unlike Uganda and Turkey, Singapore has the most restrictive refugee policy in our sample. As a member of ASEAN, Singapore has witnessed the Rohingya refugee crisis in Myanmar, where more than one million Rohingya had to leave. But Singapore refuses to take in even a single one. There is no dissent to this governmental policy from the opposition parties in parliament. Moreover, Singapore's closed-door policy applies not only to refugees from Myanmar but to all refugee groups.

To what extent do references to the liberal script and international law play a significant role in political actors' framing? We have distinguished between six different frames. Political actors can emphasize the economic aspect of the issue and evaluate the refugees in terms of their human capital. They can point to the refugees' cultural characteristics and assess whether they fit with the host population. Refugees can also be understood in moral terms, for example, by emphasizing their neediness and deservingness to legitimize their admission. Next, the acceptance of refugees can be interpreted in a legal sense. With reference to international law, such as the Geneva Refugee Convention, it can be argued that states have no right to reject refugees or to discriminate between different groups of refugees. In addition, refugees can be characterized in terms of whether they pose a security threat to the country. Finally, refugees can be understood from the perspective of international relations as political allies or enemies.

Of the six frames, four contain arguments that, from the perspective of the liberal script, are not legitimate arguments in regard to admitting refugees because they make admission contingent on certain conditions and the interest of the receiving country, which may result in discrimination against certain groups of refugees. This group includes an economic framing that views refugees in terms of their economic value, a cultural framing that discriminates against refugees based on their cultural proximity, a security framing that excludes entire refugee groups who may supposedly pose a threat to a country, and an international framing that ties admission to the foreign policy interests of a country. From the perspective of the liberal script, only a moral framing and, first and foremost, reference to international law are legitimate arguments in the discourse on admitting refugees since they refer to the refugees' need for protection—after which the interests of the receiving state must take second place—and the principle of nondiscrimination and equal treatment of all refugees regardless of their skills and their national, religious, or ethnic background.

With regard to the empirical distribution and use of the different frames by political actors, we find that the reference to liberal principles does not play a very important role in public debates on refugee admission in the six sample countries. Looking at the governments' frames, it is striking that reference to international law and the right to be accepted as refugees that derives from this reference play an important role only in the German and partially the Ugandan discourse. In the view of the German government, Germany, as a constitutional liberal democracy, is bound by universalist principles. These principles include treating everyone—including refugees—with equal dignity and, more specifically, granting asylum to those fleeing persecution. Also, in the debate in Uganda, refugees are characterized as persons entitled to certain rights under international law, even if this framing is not the most dominant. In other countries, the justification for an open refugee policy does not refer to the universalist value that every individual has a right to protection from persecution.

Interestingly, the governments of the two countries that pursue the most open refugee policies do not, or do not primarily, frame admitting refugees by making reference to the liberal script and universal human rights. A key aspect of the Ugandan government's framing is not universal but culturally bounded, by defining Uganda as an African country that shares cultural and ethnic similarities with other African countries. In this way, African refugees are included in the definition of the "we" and interpreted as brothers and sisters. The picture looks similar for Turkey. In its framing, the AKP government refers to the shared history of Turks and Syrians during the existence of the Ottoman Empire on the one hand and to the common Islamic religion on the other, which broadens the scope of the definition of those who belong to the community but does not universalize it. In other words, in both cases, the justification for opening borders to refugees is communitarian notions of solidarity and not based on universal principles.

In sum, we do not mean to suggest that the degree of adherence to the liberal script and references to it in the public discourse are completely insignificant aspects of understanding how countries respond to refugee crises. Refugee rights, as codified in international law, are part of the cultural repertoire to which actors can refer in political debates. However, we find that the readiness to admit refugees is not necessarily dependent on the extent to which a country and its political representatives adhere to the liberal script and its language of universal human rights. Country-specific processes of framing and the cultural repertoires drawn upon must be examined more closely to understand the differences in countries' refugee policies more precisely.

3. Frames and national cultural repertoires matter

Some scholars have used the term "methodological nationalism" to emphasize their claim that a nation-state perspective is no longer sufficient to describe social phenomena in the era of a globalized world, as it obscures the commonalities and processes of diffusion between countries (Robinson 1998; Wimmer & Glick-Schiller

2003). Indeed, prominent theories have posited that this might apply to policies and discourse about migrants and refugees as well. The already mentioned world society theory suggests that we might observe a convergence toward the liberal script. In turn, “securitization theory” suggests convergence toward the opposite outcome, namely, a more restrictive approach. Even though we do not provide quantitative data to confirm this in a more conclusive manner, our qualitative analyses suggest how important it is to take into account country-specific processes of meaning-making and the cultural repertoires upon which politicians draw to debate whether to admit refugees. We show that cross-national differences, as well as differences between political parties within a country, can be better understood by analyzing how governments and political parties frame the collective identity of the host society on the one hand and the refugees on the other. We distinguish six different frames as relevant for defining the “we” and the “others.” In filling the content of these frames, political actors draw upon cultural repertoires, which vary by country and political constituency within a country. We do not assume that frames and underlying cultural repertoires “cause” refugee policies, but rather, they enable and constrain them by defining what is conceivable and legitimate.

We first analyzed three countries confronted with the Syrian refugee crisis, namely Turkey, Poland, and Germany. Even though it is governed by a right-wing populist government that has increasingly rejected the values inherent in the liberal script, Turkey has admitted the largest number of Syrian refugees. We could show that the AKP government’s openness to receiving Syrian refugees is embedded in its attempt to reconnect to the heritage of the Ottoman Empire. The AKP positions Turkey as a regional power in the Middle East and includes Syrians in an expanded definition of the “we.” To do so, the Turkish government draws on very specific cultural repertoires: the historical memory of the Ottoman Empire, which dominated the Middle East and included the territory of modern Syria, as well as an Islamic (Sunni) religious identity, which is shared by many Turks and Syrians. Thus, the AKP government’s refugee policy has to be understood against the background of its more general attempt to reorient Turkish politics away from the Kemalist model of a secular, Western-oriented Turkish nation-state toward a revaluation of the Ottoman heritage and Islamic identity.

Germany admitted the largest number of refugees from Syria and the Middle East among EU member states but was motivated by very different frames than Turkey. The position of the German government under Angela Merkel can best be summarized as an attempt to serve as a humanitarian role model. It framed the reception of refugees from Syria and the Middle East predominantly as a question of humanitarianism and commitment to international law—at least during the initial period of an open refugee policy (over time, the discourse became more restrictive). Even though these frames are in line with the liberal script, it is important to highlight that they are drawn from cultural repertoires specific to the German case. One of them is the “sanctity” of the German Basic Law in Germany’s postwar political culture, which enshrined the principles of human dignity and the right to asylum as a consequence of the experience of National Socialism. Flowing from this is also a sense of

Germany's humanitarian obligation toward people fleeing war and persecution and the necessity to make up for past wrongs. To a lesser extent, admitting refugees was also discussed as a matter of economic utility. This frame derives from the narrative of Germany's economic strength (an important collective identity marker in post-war Germany) and the need to sustain it with additional skilled labor in the face of imminent demographic decline.

Finally, Poland, under the populist right-wing PiS government, refused to participate in the relocation of Syrian refugees within the EU while being very open to receiving refugees from Ukraine. The Polish government's refusal to admit Syrian refugees can be understood as a defense of national sovereignty and Christian identity. On the one hand, the PiS government framed Middle Eastern refugees as "Muslims" who are culturally incompatible with Christian Poles. The source of this framing lies in an identity construction of Poland as a Christian Catholic nation and the "bulwark of Christianity" in Europe against the expansion of Islam. On the other hand, the government emphasized the need to defend Poland's national sovereignty vis-à-vis the EU and European powers (particularly Germany) trying to impose the relocation of refugees to Poland. This framing draws on a longstanding narrative of national victimhood, according to which Poland is constantly at threat by larger European powers that attempt to undermine its national sovereignty. This narrative is based on memories of the partition of Poland and the West's "betrayal" during the Yalta Conference, which assigned Poland to the Soviet Union's sphere of influence.

Moving beyond the European context, we selected three countries in other regions as well, namely, Uganda, Chile, and Singapore. Even though it is one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world, Uganda pursues an open refugee policy (hosting refugees primarily from South Sudan) and ranks high among the countries that host the largest number of refugees. The approach by the government of Uganda under President Museveni is inspired by a Pan-African and anti-colonial identity and the pursuit of international prestige. On the one hand, the government expands the Ugandan in-group boundary to include refugees from neighboring countries. To do so, it draws on the cultural repertoire of Pan-Africanism, which suggests that African borders were artificially drawn by Western colonial powers and that Africans owe each other solidarity across these national borders. On the other hand, the government frames the admittance of refugees as a question of international recognition based on the perception that Uganda's international recognition depends, at least in part, on its open refugee policy. Arguably, this helps offset international criticisms of its authoritarian political regime.

Chile hosts one of the largest numbers of displaced Venezuelans in Latin America. Even though it was ideologically right-wing, the Piñera government pursued a rather ambivalent policy toward refugees. It presented itself as an advocate of displaced Venezuelans but, at the same time, did not grant them protection according to international law and attempted to limit their numbers. This policy was based on the self-perception as a sovereign nation and an economically successful anti-Socialist example. The right-wing government drew on the narrative that Chile is an

exceptional country in the region based on its political stability and liberal economic policy. This self-perception positions Chile as a systemic rival of Socialist Venezuela and generates solidarity with Venezuelans displaced by the regime. However, the solidarity with displaced Venezuelans was offset by another framing. The government emphasized Chile's national sovereignty and had a limited inclination to comply with international law. This framing implies not treating displaced Venezuelans as refugees and privileging those who bring enough human capital to benefit Chile's economy.

Finally, Singapore refuses to admit any refugees. This stance is surprising, given that Singapore is a highly developed country with a very diverse population and a large share of migrants. The position of the Singaporean government is embedded in its identity as a postcolonial sovereign state that has managed to be successful economically and ethnically balanced. Both the government and the opposition parties emphasize the principle of national self-determination and reject outside interference based on human rights considerations interpreted as Western values. Furthermore, Singapore is interpreted as a nation whose wealth is essentially built on the human capital of its population. From this perspective, refugees with low human capital appear as a danger to Singapore's prosperity. Finally, Singapore is understood as a highly multicultural nation whose cohesion must, thus, be carefully managed in order not to fall apart. Refugees from other cultural backgrounds could disrupt this balance.

We argue that not only government positions on receiving refugees are affected by national contexts and nation-state specific cultural repertoires but also those of opposition parties. An updated version of Seymour Lipset and Stein Rokkan's classic "cleavage theory" suggests that conflicts over admitting migrants and refugees between different parties within a country are universally structured by an emerging cleavage between "cosmopolitans" on the one hand and "communitarians" on the other. It is assumed that cosmopolitans support admitting refugees based on a commitment to universal rights, cultural diversity, and international cooperation, whereas communitarians reject admitting refugees, emphasizing national sovereignty and cultural homogeneity (de Wilde et al. 2019). In contrast to this hypothesis, we argue that country-specific cleavage constellations must be taken into account to better understand how political parties differ in terms of their framing and positioning.

The cosmopolitan–communitarian cleavage theory best applies to the political debate in Poland, which divided the right-wing populist PiS party and the liberal Civic Platform party. While the PiS appealed to communitarian frames, such as national sovereignty and cultural incompatibility, the Civic Platform emphasized cosmopolitan frames. For example, it framed admitting refugees as an international obligation required by Poland's EU membership and emphasized Poland's cosmopolitan historical heritage dating back to the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth in early Modernity. Overall, in the Polish debate, fundamental divisions in the interpretation of Polish national identity and the country's place in the EU came to the fore.

The cosmopolitan–communitarian cleavage theory also helps account for at least some of the interparty differences in Germany, even though initially, the parties did not align along this cleavage. At the beginning of the refugee crisis in the late summer of 2015, a surprisingly broad consensus emerged among political parties based on a shared cosmopolitan framing. This agreement included not only the more left-wing parties but also the conservative party (CDU) under Chancellor Angela Merkel. The constellation changed when the radical right-wing challenger party (AfD) filled the communitarian camp, agitating against admitting refugees based on frames like cultural incompatibility and national sovereignty. The center-right then reacted to the AfD’s rise by moving toward more restrictive, communitarian positions over the winter from 2015 to 2016.

In contrast, the political debates in Chile and Turkey cannot be accounted for by the theory of a conflict between cosmopolitans and communitarians. In Turkey, a right-wing conservative party (the AKP) pursues the most open refugee policy. As we have seen, this policy is not based on cosmopolitan frames but rather on communitarian frames emphasizing cultural commonalities and religious solidarity. In turn, the opposition formed by the center-left (CHP), as well as nationalist parties (like the MHP), deploy frames emphasizing a cultural incompatibility between Turks and Syrians (as “Arabs”) and the economic burden of hosting Syrian refugees. In contrast to the AKP, they draw on a Kemalist notion of Turkish national identity. The only party falling into the cosmopolitan camp as expected is the left HDP, a former Kurdish party advocating an open refugee policy based on respect for international law.

In Chile, the political debate on admitting displaced Venezuelans also followed other lines of conflict than between cosmopolitans and communitarians. The right-wing Piñera government was more welcoming of displaced Venezuelans in rhetoric (though less so in practice) than could have been expected from a right-wing party coalition, while the left-wing opposition was hesitant to position itself on the issue and did not publicly espouse recognizing displaced Venezuelans as refugees according to the definition of the Cartagena Declaration, as could have been expected in theory. In the Chilean case, the main dividing line runs between right-wing and left-wing parties and their respective interpretations of Chile’s Socialist experiment and ensuing military dictatorship under Pinochet.

Finally, Uganda and Singapore also deviate from the expectations of the theory of a cosmopolitan–communitarian cleavage in important ways. Even though Uganda hosts a very large number of refugees, our study did not find significant political contestation surrounding the refugee issue and little to no differences between parties. The government’s refugee policy is occasionally criticized by single deputies, often from peripheral regions hosting large numbers of refugees but not following party lines. They raise concerns over the depletion of natural resources or security without calling into question the general direction of Uganda’s open-door policy. The lack of opposition to the government’s refugee policy could be attributed to the regime’s semi-democratic character. However, this attribution does not explain the fact that there is political contestation over other issues.

Singapore is also a deviant case in two respects. First, the government and opposition parties agree that Singapore should not host refugees while disagreeing on the number of labor migrants it should take in. This disagreement shows that the refugee issue is not necessarily bundled with the question of openness toward immigrants in general, as the ideal types of cosmopolitanism and communitarianism suggest. Second, in terms of labor migration, the government's open migration policy is sharply criticized by the political opposition, demanding a reduction of migration flows. However, this opposition does not come from a right-wing, conservative party but from the social democratic Workers Party, intending to protect the welfare of native Singaporeans from foreigners.

In summary, we conclude that the cosmopolitan–communitarian cleavage helps account for differences between political parties in some countries but not others. Hence, the country-specific cleavage structure must be considered to understand the peculiarities of how the refugee issue is debated instead of applying a “one size fits all” perspective.

Our study rests on a qualitative discourse analysis. By taking into consideration six countries from different world regions and different political actors within each country, it goes beyond many other qualitative studies that usually focus only on one country or even one political actor. Only a comparison of different countries and different political actors within a country makes the nation-specific peculiarities visible. Accordingly, our main contribution through this book is to show how refugee policies of governments and opposition parties are shaped—though not determined—by frames and, above all, how this process depends upon different notions of national identity. Although our study covers only six countries, we suggest that at least two conclusions are generalizable. First, political actors' interpretation of a country's collective identity on the one hand and refugees on the other is key to understanding their policy preferences regarding admitting or rejecting refugees. Second, we suggest that our typology of six different frames that political actors use to interpret the collective identity of their country and refugees can also be used to classify political discourse on admitting refugees in other countries, although the substantive characterizations of the features of national identity and refugees depend upon the country-specific cultural repertoires.

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