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# **Justice Claims in Media Narratives of (Im)Migration in the UK: Normative Orientations and the EU Migration System of Governance**

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## **Abstract**

It is generally agreed that a massive influx of foreigners into their country is not only a social issue to be understood and handled properly, but also something that prompts strong sentiments and moral qualms. By associating the narratives that emerged recently in UK mainstream media, through which the British public ‘made sense of’ (im)migration, with specific conceptions of justice, it is possible to discern the normative premises of the country’s response to (exceptional) movements of people within the EU migration system of governance. Remarkably, while migration narratives hinge to a large extent on the need to ‘take back control’ and ‘defend’ a threatened nation, the EU proves to be a problematic, yet very salient component of Britain’s debate on immigration, which could continue even after the latter’s progressive detachment from the Union.

**Keywords:** immigration, narratives, global justice, media, United Kingdom, European Union

Among the puzzles British politics has offered lately is a somewhat unexpected collapse in people’s concern about (im)migration<sup>1</sup> since the Brexit referendum; starting in June 2016, a steadily decreasing number of poll respondents consider (im)migration one of their biggest political concerns, whereas the share had ranged between a quarter and a half of the interviewees for the previous fifteen years, in spite of other important issues such as the economy during the recession (Blinder and Richards 2018). Of note is that there has been only a modest decline in immigration levels since the referendum, and no major change in migration policy. This once again raises the question of the relationship between the ‘facts’ of migration and the way we perceive and make sense of them.

Despite the diminishing salience of migration-related concerns among the population, most national and foreign newspaper readers would probably get the impression that British people are intrinsically

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<sup>1</sup> We use this spelling throughout to indicate that narratives may refer (often ambiguously) to *both* the arrival of immigrants into the UK (frequently with an emphasis on specific policy matters) *and* migration as a more general concept of people moving and settling in places different from those of origin. In the latter case, narratives tend to be about, but not limited to, the practical and normative effects on international movements of human beings.

hostile to immigration, especially considering the way the issue was treated during the 2015 migration crisis. According to Berry *et al.* (2016), the United Kingdom's (UK) media system had the most negative and polarised coverage of the period among the EU member states (MSs) analysed (Germany, Spain, Italy and Sweden). In particular, migration was seen as 'out of control' and a security threat, and migrants as a burden on Britain's labour market, border security and welfare, thus serving to legitimise measures such as restricted asylum and tougher border control. In particular, right-wing media were uniquely aggressive towards refugees and migrants (Wodak 2015); although the UK ranked only fifth with respect to the number of asylum applications received in the European Economic Area in the 2015-16 period, about 3 percent of the area's asylum claims below the levels reached in the early 2000s (Blinder 2019).

This tangle of mixed signals confirms that "[m]igration and asylum policy is as much about reality as it is about perception – perception by policy makers/politicians and by citizens/voters of what is happening and how it can be managed" (Triandafyllidou 2017, 1). However, this begs the question of where and how these perceptions are socially, politically and culturally shaped. Although far from straightforward, the role played by media in shaping people's perceptions and opinions, the actual policy implemented by the UK – both as a single country and as part of the European Union's migration system of governance – appears to be crucial. The purpose of this study is to improve our understanding of Britain's approach to migration by looking at a selection of newspaper articles, in order to identify the main narratives on migration emerging with respect to

four key periods between 2014 and 2017. The aim then will be to ascertain what specific claims of justice underlie these narratives.<sup>2</sup> This will make it possible to understand the different worldviews and moral conceptions informing the debate *and the response* to migration, and to see whether and how the UK, through its policy and leading public discourses, relates to the EU's aspiration to act as a normative actor (also) in the field of immigration and asylum policy.

The article is structured as follows: we first introduce an overview of the literature dealing with the role of media in UK migration affairs. Next, we present the theoretical and methodological approaches informing the analysis, and then explain and classify the narratives identified. A discussion of justice claims precedes the conclusions.

### **Migration, press and policy: an overview**

Representations of migration by the British media have been the object of extensive research (*inter alia* Allen 2016; Schemer 2012; Gabrielatos and Baker 2008; Kaye 2001). While it is generally agreed that media have an impact on public opinion, it is intensely debated whether media merely reinforce pre-existing orientations, redefine preferences, or create new ones (Gavin 2018). In their empirical study on immigration over a 40-year span, David Smith and David Deacon (2018) observe that, apart from the expected fluctuations across the periods, negativity tends to dominate press coverage. This is manifested in the prominence given to immigration issues provoking a sense of social alarm, and can be attributed especially to the limited migration-related concerns covered by the media, mostly concentrated on questions such as race, reception, housing, employment, integration, crime and violence and 'illegal' immigration. Likewise, Scott Blinder and Lindsay Allen (2016) point out that public opposition to immigration, even before the 2015 crisis, was being fuelled by a depiction of immigrants in the British press that was not simply "positive" or "negative", but rather selectively and disproportionally focused on "illegal" immigration and asylum seekers, under-representing far

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<sup>2</sup> In line with the GLOBUS project (Amato and Lucarelli in this issue).

larger components of the immigrant population – workers, students and immigrants’ family members. Moreover, the British press has tended to participate in the public debate on migration by providing, to an increasing extent, fully-formed frames and opinions rather than simply reporting facts (Allen 2016). At the same time, a progressive decline in informed discussions about the status of migrants, often framed in the inaccurate terms of legal/illegal, has been accompanied by an increase in discussions relating to limiting or controlling migration. Scott Blinder and Anne-Marie Jeannette (2018) have shown that the language used by the British media may result in conspicuous shifts in public perceptions of immigrants, without any realistic understanding of the overall size and make-up of the British immigrant population.

The salience of the immigration issue in the contemporary British public sphere has also been evidenced through analysis of the ‘Brexit rhetoric’ of policymakers and media, which generates discourses of uncertainty and ever-growing anxiety, as well as xenophobia and hatred (Cap 2017, 67). Issues related to the representation of EU immigration in the UK have also been studied in terms of East-West movements (Spigelman 2013). As for asylum and forced migration, Alexandria Innes (2010) argues that the ability of the mass media to construct asylum seekers, by definition among the most vulnerable individuals in the world, into a group posing a threat to the physical integrity, economy and identity of the British state and society, is not only testimony to their influence, but also a powerful complement to the country’s asylum policy in its construction of national identity.

For the purposes of this article, the interrelatedness between the role of media and policymaking is therefore worthy of attention. In his study on migration in British media, Terry Threadgold (2009) argues that there is a sort of symbiosis between media and policy. On the one hand, politicians, media and academics provide the language for talking about immigration, set the agenda and provide frames informing this policy area. On the other hand, governments influence the media by providing a policy focus and steering attention to certain issues or initiatives. The frames and narratives that emerge can therefore be regarded as the result of two mutually reinforcing trends, as the stories told by the media based on public concerns can feed back into policy discourse to generate and address the same concerns. Ideas shaping public opinion have been regarded as possible determinants of policy too (Jones and McBeth 2010). For example, Will Somerville (2007) also notes with respect to asylum seekers that the media have affected policy development processes in similar feedback loops involving political leadership and public attitudes (Stratham 2003).

### **Theoretical frameworks and methodology**

Narratives reflect the way in which those involved in the debate on (im)migration articulate the uncertainty, complexity, and polarisation characterising the topic (Roe 1994). Analysis of narratives in the UK (im)migration domain has been applied predominantly to norms, policy documents and practices of public servants and elected officials involved in the management of migration issues. In this regard, Christina Boswell’s work (2011) on the reduction of the inherent complexity of migration issues carried out by the British government through narratives of ‘societal steering’ remains among the most theoretically significant and thorough application of this method. It is based on a notion of narrative as a set of claims about a) the policy problem that a policy intervention should address; b) the causes of, and possible solutions to, the problem, and c) how policy interventions have affected, or are likely to affect, these policy problems (Boswell *et al.* 2011). Yet, a number of works based on related linguistic-based approaches (for example critical discourse analyses and framing analysis) have also looked at public discourse and narratives, especially in UK national media. Among the more recent studies, Bastian Vollmer (2017) has emphasized the discrepancy between the

representations of the UK border (in relation to migration) as a *locus* of security in policy and one of ‘insecurity’ in the public realm.

In line with the aims and purposes of this group of articles, we use the theoretical and methodological instruments offered by the analysis of narratives to make sense of the stories about (im)migration told in the British press, that is, to identify causes, developments and consequences, underlying rationales and reasons for reaction through which all relevant actors approach the multifaceted issue of migration. Notably, these narratives are assumed to make sense not only by identifying cause and effect relations, but also by providing *logical and moral grounds* for (policy) responses to the phenomenon (D’Amato and Lucarelli in this issue). Therefore, careful attention will be paid to the worldviews in which the cognitive narratives present in British public discourse on (im)migration are embedded, as well as the conceptions of justice informing the narratives. Three conceptions of justice are presented below (see Eriksen 2016).

**Table 1: Claims of justice**

	Context of justice and normative approach	Referent Actors	Reference value
<i>Justice as non-domination</i>	Westphalian	States and (national) communities	Non-interference
<i>Justice as impartiality</i>	Cosmopolitan	Individuals as bearers of human rights	Compliance with international norms
<i>Justice as mutual recognition</i>	Inter-subjective	People with specific individual and collective identities	Dialogue and mutual recognition

The first is a Westphalian notion – justice as non-domination – according to which the moral integrity of any subject’s conduct depends on whether it prioritises the interests and values of his/her respective community. Migration narratives assuming that the stability and/or the advancement of the domestic community is a pre-eminent moral criterion are associated with this normative conception. The second is a cosmopolitan notion – justice as impartiality – premised on the unconditional ethical values of human rights. Migration narratives assuming that moving to and being accepted in a foreign country is a human right sanctioned by cogent universal (customary or statute) norms, irrespective of the migrant’s motives and circumstances are associated with this justice claim. Finally, according to a conception of justice as mutual recognition, normative actions should take into consideration the stories as told by the subjects involved, that is, their experience and behaviour as they give meaning to them. The corresponding narratives are those in which the focus is on the migrants’ points of view in relationship to those of the native inhabitants, and heed is taken of iniquities, such as those that emerge due to structural biases and deep-rooted prejudices, despite the presence of formally just and well-intended policy measures and institutions, – and the measures required to put them right.

### ***Rationale, data and methods***

The online database Lexis-Nexis was used to collect newspaper articles on issues of (im)migration, asylum and refugees in four specific moments with the aim of discovering the narratives emerging in

the national public debate. The database could be searched for articles containing specific search words, during specific time periods and in specific newspapers. *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* were selected on the basis of their circulation, political leaning, and readership. According to a recent survey (YouGov 2017) on public perceptions of where British mainstream national newspapers sit on the left-right political spectrum, Britain's most widely read newspaper, the *Daily Mail*, is seen as the most right-wing newspaper, while *The Guardian*, lying at the other end of the spectrum, is regarded as Britain's most left-wing newspaper. *The Telegraph* is considered to be right of centre or fairly right-wing, while *The Independent* is seen as broadly centrist, but slightly left-leaning. The four key moments selected for observation were the European Parliament elections (May 2014), the EU-Turkey Statement or 'deal' (March 2016), the 'Brexit' referendum on the withdrawal of the UK from the EU (June 2016), and an 'eventless' week (January 2017) to ascertain 'background noise' related to migration in the public debate.

The articles were then manually selected, based on shared sampling criteria; letters to the editors, interviews, transcripts of speeches were excluded, as were duplicates produced by the database due to multiple editions of the newspapers. For the eventless week, articles dealing with (im)migration issues outside Europe, such as on the U.S.-Mexican border, or in Australia, were also excluded. The final UK dataset contained 485 articles. Table 2 provides a summary of the main search criteria as well as the total number of articles collected for each newspaper for the four key moments.

**Table 2. Articles per newspaper per period**

Key moment	European Parliament elections (22 May 2014)	EU-Turkey Statement (18 March 2016)	Brexit Referendum (23 June 2016)	Eventless week (9-15 January 2017)
Search words	'EU elections' OR 'European elections' AND '*migra*' OR 'refugees' OR 'asylum'	'EU' AND 'Turkey' AND 'deal' OR 'agreement'	'Brexit' AND '*migra*' OR 'refugees' OR 'asylum'	'*migra*' OR 'refugees' OR 'asylum'
Selected period	3 weeks: 8 May 2014 to 29 May 2014	3 weeks: 04 March 2016 to 25 March 2016	1 week: 20 June 2016 to 26 June 2016	1 week: 9 January 2017 – 15 January 2017
<i>The Guardian</i>	37	33	50	47
<i>The Independent</i>	26	18	39	33
<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	33	18	21	31
<i>Daily Mail</i>	35	21	21	22
Overall	131	90	131	133
Total: 485				

The further step in the analysis involved a close reading of all selected articles in order to identify dominant and counter-narratives. Stretches of texts were thus manually coded according to shared guidelines, pinpointing narratives that framed each issue, the sources or ‘claimants’, and the ‘referents’ of justice typically reported by journalists. The aim was to facilitate analysis of the embedded ‘justice’ claims.

### Identifying and analysing narratives

In this section, we focus on the four dominant narratives that surfaced most consistently: 1) the EU matters; 2) The threatened nation island; 3) (Im)migration as a socio-economic matter, and 4) (Im)migration as a question of humanity. They may be considered macro-narratives in that they encompass a variety of sub-narratives. Table 3 provides a synopsis of narratives and sub-narratives in the articles selected.

**Table 3. Narratives (and sub-narratives)**

Narratives	Description of narratives / sub-narratives and themes	Main occurrences (time)	Main occurrences (newspaper)
‘EU matters’ 90 (30%)	<i>(Im)migration as a matter pre-eminently bound to the EU-UK connection</i>  Freedom of movement Future relations with the EU EU asylum politics EU External action	European Parliament elections Eventless week	<i>The Guardian</i> <i>Daily Mail</i>
‘The threatened island nation’ 82 (27.3%)	<i>(Im)migration as a threat to material and ideational aspects of national security</i>  Border control Security (material and societal) Vulnerability Control/Sovereignty	Eventless week European Parliament elections EU-Turkey Statement Brexit	<i>Daily Mail</i> <i>The Daily Telegraph</i> <i>The Independent</i> <i>The Guardian</i>
‘(Im)migration as a socio-economic issue’ 70 (23.3%)	<i>(Im)migration as a policy matter to be handled with common sense and pragmatism</i>  Welfare and resource management Day-to-day policy-making	Brexit EU-Turkey Statement	<i>The Independent</i> <i>The Guardian</i> <i>The Daily Telegraph</i>
‘(Im)migration as a question of humanity’ 58 (19.3%)	<i>(Im)migration is about protecting people, as universal right-bearers or as concrete subjects</i>  Compliance with human rights protection regimes – especially in the case of asylum seekers and refugees	EU-Turkey Statement Brexit	<i>The Guardian</i> <i>The Independent</i>



	Recognition of migrants as subjects		
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### ***‘The EU matters’***

The mutual relationship between the debate on (im)migration and the equally heated one on UK membership in the EU is extremely intricate, with issues of (im)migration from within and outside the EU, asylum and freedom of movement, national and EU levels of governance frequently – and in a more or less unwarranted way – overlapping, as well as being conflated and mutually inferred.

The ‘EU matters’ narrative provides a powerful focus and structure to this cluttered interrelationship by construing the UK-EU connection as *the* determining factor in upholding *or* thwarting the country’s aspiration to regain full control over its immigration policy, as well as maintaining *or* undermining the country’s socio-economic and international stability, which is assumed to depend to a great extent on (im)migration. In turn, (im)migration is presented as a factor generating a genuine crisis in the UK-EU relationship; that is, a unique historical situation in which every possible outcome, from collapse to regeneration, is equally plausible (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017, 451). Even the narratives deliberately employed by politicians are heavily affected by the relevance of EU-related discourses, as the case of Ed Miliband’s 2014 campaign shows:

Ed Miliband will be put under pressure from Labour MPs calling on him to promise a referendum on Europe in the wake of the Euro elections [...]. “If we lose, after the country going through the worst recession ever, we could see part of our vote moving over permanently. For much of this vote, we don't represent their interests any more and Ukip is prepared to voice their fears on immigration, which rate high in their politics” (Grice 2014).

This narrative intertwines multiple aspects impacting on UK migration policy, such as the EU’s international initiatives in this area, the Single Market, the status of EU citizens in the UK and vice versa, as well as more general commentaries about the integration process as such, in order to understand and respond to the phenomenon, by either supporting, ignoring or opposing the EU. In the four periods under scrutiny, with a slightly higher concentration in the first two, when the relation was still relatively less obvious, – a substantial number of articles contain narratives that make sense of (im)migration through the EU-UK relationship. These narratives are more about ‘the politics of immigration’ than immigration itself; in other words, they constantly recount the link between the two political cleavages at the national and the European level, striving for a simplification that is however only achieved superficially (see also Balch and Balabanova 2017).

The vibrant, and somewhat convoluted, trans-party debate about whether a “binary choice” needs to be made between the goals of curbing immigration and having privileged access to the Common Market, is a good example of the pivotal position of the EU in narratives:

May denied Britain would face a “binary choice” between curbing immigration and having preferential access to the EU's single market. However, she subsequently rejected the idea of a "hard" versus "soft" Brexit. Instead, she insisted the Government would work towards "the best possible deal" in terms of access to the bloc's single market. (Cunningham 2017)

### ***‘The threatened island nation’***

The notions of ‘insularity’ and ‘island mentality’ have frequently been used to refer to Britain’s sense of superiority and exceptionalism, its ‘emotional’ detachment from continental Europe, and a general lack of knowledge and interest in all that lies outside its immediate experience (Garton Ash 2011). Lately, a more literal meaning of ‘being an island’ has also been gaining ground; ever since (im)migration has become an increasingly central theme in the national public debate, the drawbacks and benefits of being a country isolated from other land masses have been incorporated into an array of relevant narratives.

Most of them hinge on Britain’s vulnerability, presented as the result of the country’s internal equilibrium being damaged much more easily by external factors, at least compared to non-island nations, whose history of mobile boundaries and continued interactions with neighbouring nations have made them relatively resilient to transborder pressures like population movements. In the ‘threatened island’ narrative, *excessive* immigration – in fact, virtually *any considerable amount* thereof – impinges upon Britain’s demographic and cultural make-up, jeopardising its very foundations as a state, both material and ideational. The response to this existential threat consists in re-equipping the country with effective means of protection – hence ‘border control’ and ‘security’ narratives – which is premised on the country’s independence from any external or higher-ranking authorities. The question is explicitly articulated as a matter of ‘sovereignty’ only in a comparatively limited number of articles (more frequently in left-leaning newspapers, in particular with a cautionary purpose). This narrative overlaps, but also clashes, with the socio-economic one, as the problem of the constraints imposed by the EU and international regimes is frequently treated as a question of *empirical* control, that is, of borders, taxes and revenues, law-making and regulations, rather than of supreme authority. This ‘operational notion’, as Gamble (2003, 23) suggests, is consistent with the conceptual history of sovereignty in the UK in which the ‘ultimate’ form of sovereignty seems to have an internal orientation, traditionally equated with parliamentary sovereignty. It is not by chance that *The Guardian* refers to “abstractions [...] of sovereignty”:

Throughout the campaign he [Farage] has tried to stick rigidly to a simple dual-track message: Britain's communities are being overwhelmed by immigrants and the British government can do nothing about this so long as Britain remains in the European Union, a membership UKIP will end through a referendum. By combining the emotive message about migrants with the abstractions of British sovereignty, the revolt on the right has become the revolt of the disenchanted. (Wintour 2014)

In this perspective, tales of sovereignty may be regarded as attempts by social forces and political parties to advance their agendas, as well as the more structural processes of securitisation of migration and asylum (Diez and Squire 2008). In fact, while the perspective of existential annihilation looms large in many narratives, it is the ‘middle-range’ threat posed by the lack of *control* over (im)migration to the government’s effectiveness and democratic legitimacy that is perceived as the more urgent concern in the public debate. In most accounts of ‘uncontrolled’ immigration, the EU and, in particular, the freedom of movement of European labour within the Single Market, as well as the rights deriving from EU citizenship, are singled out as the main causes of this predicament. This is confirmed by the concentration of this sub-narrative in both the EP elections and the Brexit referendum periods. In fact, the narrative of impending danger usually includes a semantic motif of imminent resurgence, enshrined in the ‘Take Back Control’ motto, popularised during the Brexit campaign. Indeed, once safe from the EU’s reckless experiments in post-national policymaking and institution-building, British authorities (not only the legislative and the executive, but also the

judiciary) will once again have full control over all the means needed to secure national borders and the autonomy of the country.

The adoption in 2010 of the net migration target as the centrepiece of the country's immigration policy is nested in a policy narrative of Britain as a nation that, owing to 'objective' geographical circumstances, can only afford to host a certain number of people at any given time. This sub-narrative inescapably calls for a rigid immigration policy for fear of a demographic, economic and cultural collapse of the country, in spite of the government's and the British people's best intentions to harbour people escaping from persecution (see Tuckett 2017).

### ***'(Im)migration as a socio-economic issue'***

A number of narratives construe (im)migration in rather prosaic terms, stressing aspects that act as a so-called 'pull factor', the ordinary policy machinery necessary to administer the flows, and the impact of human movements on the resources (welfare and services) of the receiving country. Accordingly, the responses entailed in such narratives are characterised by a sensible and realistic approach, as well as a *modus operandi* based on practical rather than theoretical considerations, which may be traced back to the pragmatic approach to policy matters generally regarded as a distinctive attribute of British politics, if not a feature of national identity as a whole (Kelly 2003, 243; Kenny 1999).

Especially in the period of the 2016 referendum, migration-related narratives tended to focus on down-to-earth aspects concerning 'regular people'. On the one hand, the Remain camp and, in general, articles in left-leaning newspapers tended to be based on the opinion of the 'overwhelming majority of economists':

Most economists say the overall impact of EU immigration into Britain is positive, as it has been with successive waves of immigrants since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The OECD says immigration has accounted for half of UK GDP growth since 2005. The best evidence available shows that current immigrants contribute more in taxes than they cost in welfare or public services. Solid evidence also suggests EU immigration has not depressed UK wages or cost British workers' jobs. Britain has the fourth lowest unemployment rate in the EU, and never in history have more British people been in work (albeit many in jobs less secure than they would like). And while it plainly increases demand on public services such as schools, housing and healthcare, EU immigration also boosts the amount of money available to pay for them. (Henley 2016)

Likewise, most international organisations warned against the negative economic consequences of leaving, also due to the prospective shortage of European labour and a diminished appeal of the country for high-end immigrants. On the other hand, short of plain economic chauvinism, the Leavers' narrative was that a short-term economic downturn would be a price worth paying for the potential economic gain in the long run, as the return of full control over borders to the British government would bring more opportunities for British workers and more effective welfare services, apart from freedom from the Union's red tape and self-defeating regulations.

Mass migration played a crucial role in the result with areas having the highest influx of foreigners voting most strongly to leave. Concerns about the impact on jobs, wages, schools and healthcare, plus sweeping changes to neighbourhoods, drove millions to back Brexit. (Drury and Peev 2016)

An eminently pragmatic approach appears to inform the narrative of Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, in which any consideration of EU membership and all that it entails in terms of free movement, immigration and asylum policies, should not derive from a commitment to the integration

project, but be contingent on its compatibility with the protection of British workers' rights and wage levels.

Labour is not wedded to freedom of movement for EU citizens as a point of principle. But nor can we afford to lose full access to the European markets on which so many British businesses and jobs depend. Changes to the way migration rules operate from the EU will be part of the negotiations. (Swinford 2017)

In the socio-economic narratives, 'low politics' themes appear to be combined (if not conflated) regularly with others focused more on security issues or empirical questions of self-(national) government. Arguably, what makes the thematic boundaries between narratives even more indistinct is the use of the flexible concept of 'control' by the Leave campaigners. On the one hand, control may refer merely to the government's need to gain a firmer grasp of the demographic variable, based on the assumption that this is the only reasonable way to ensure an effective and ultimately just governance of the national economy. On the other hand, control also evokes concerns that "rankle at a much more fundamental level than the fear of immigration and the obsession with sovereignty" (Freedman 2016, 5). In fact, the emphasis on economic aspects does not necessarily imply the pre-eminence of a utilitarian rationale over an ideational one. This can be seen in discourses on Britain's national pride and independence by *Daily Mail* commentators and one-nation conservatives, with their yearning for the country's glorious past as a global *trade* power.

A vote to leave would enable us to fulfil our destiny as one of the world's greatest trading nations, free to strike deals with any country we like. It would also give us back our seats on international bodies, instead of being one voice in 28, represented by a bureaucrat without our interests at heart. (*Daily Mail* 2016)

### ***'Immigration as a question of humanity'***

The public debate in Britain does not lack narratives that view immigration in terms of human rights and, to a lesser extent, the actual subjectivities of those who leave their place of origin due to persecution, fear, dire circumstances or just in search of an improvement in their lives. We draw here on the concept of 'humanity' to include narratives hinging not only on respect and promotion of (or the opposition to) universal human rights, but also all other instances of protection and care towards migrants of any kind. With the onset of the migration crisis, several humanity narratives emerged in which the EU and other governments, especially those of Greece and other Balkan countries failed to protect migrants from the dangers and difficulties of their journey towards Europe.

Depictions of a guilty EU, inactive in the face of the tragic deaths of people trying to reach southern European shores, are strikingly different from those to be found, in much larger greater number, in the three weeks around the conclusion of the EU-Turkey deal Statement. In this period, British and foreign politicians and decision-makers, NGOs and journalists concur with a story of the EU's all-too-active support in its willingness to strike a deal with a regime that is at best erratic in its commitment to improve its poor human rights record, as well as those looking for safe haven. The undermining of the immigrants' dignity is a central theme of those narrations, which that see them degraded to mere bargaining chips – and potential victims – of a legally and ethically ambiguous pact, ratified in the name of wicked (supra)national interests.

Concerns about the human welfare of migrants are more frequent in left-leaning newspapers. For right-leaning newspapers, the deal's biggest flaw is not its undesirable effects on people, but rather its unrealistic premise that the EU can actually live up to a minimum standard of statecraft.

Nevertheless, some do draw attention to the questionable ethical and legal status of the deal, reporting legal experts' warnings that the agreement with the Turkish government

falls foul of a number of pieces of EU and international law, including that asylum seekers must have their cases assessed as individuals (Holehouse 2016).

At the same time, *The Independent* presents an array of stories that include humanity concerns – the EU's failure to strike

a genuinely humanitarian deal, not a cynical political fix (*The Independent* 2016).

While humanity concerns are spelled out in plainer terms in *The Guardian*:

[T]hose who matter most are not the politicians. They are the people driven out of Syria by civil war, with little hope of an early return, and who are prepared to risk everything on the seas, across the mountains and up against the barbed wire border fences. (*The Guardian* 2016).

Considerations of self-interest in the negotiation cannot be glossed over; however, it should be noted that it is only at the member state level that self-interest and fear of refugees go hand in hand. In contrast, the EU's collective self-interest implies preserving freedom of movement for those within the EU's common borders, which calls for an effective and *humane* common asylum policy. Destination countries have the right to safeguard their territory and population, and reserve access and assistance to asylum seekers only. Yet, victims of oppression in their countries of origin or transit should not have to pay the price of the destinations countries' inability to distinguish *fairly* and *effectively* humanitarian from economic migrants, and to address transnational human movement and its causes. It is the duty of the EU to prevent this.

While asylum seeker-centred humanitarian narratives dwindle to a trickle in the Brexit referendum period, they flare up again in the eventless week. Left-leaning papers accuse European governments of providing asylum seekers and migrants with inadequate protection against the perils faced at sea or along the Balkan route, while the British government is at fault for receiving such a limited number of Syrian refugees through its resettlement programme, as well as for the subtle discrimination in terms of service provisions to the few that actually make it to the UK. However, the main focus of this narrative is non-European immigrants' (mainly asylum seekers) freedom of movement, granted by the Single Market to all EU citizens, is also relevant; indeed, it may be regarded as an instance of cosmopolitan principles implemented on a distinct political dimension through the European integration process (Telò 2004).

### **Discussion: narratives and claims of global justice**

The rates at which each of the three justice claims occur in the narratives on migration come as no surprise, with non-domination turning up more than half the time impartiality in over one-third of all cases (38 percent) and justice as mutual recognition trailing with 8.6 percent (see Table 4).

**Table 4: Narratives and justice claims\***

<div>Claims of justice</div> <div>Narratives</div>	Justice as non-domination	Justice as impartiality	Justice as mutual recognition
'The EU matters'	47 (29.3%)	39 (34.1%)	4 (15.3%)

‘The threatened island nation’	79 (49.3%)	3 (2.6%)	0
‘(Im)migration as a socio-economic matter’	34 (21.2%)	24 (21%)	12 (46.1%)
‘(Im)migration as a question of humanity’	0	48 (42.1%)	10 (38.4%)
<i>Overall</i>	<i>160 (53.3%)</i>	<i>114 (38%)</i>	<i>26 (8,6%)</i>

\* Percentages indicate each narrative’s share of the overall number of articles falling under each notion of justice.

### ***Occurrences of conceptions of justice across narratives***

It appears that the non-domination claim provides a normative rationale to narratives falling under the heading ‘the threatened island nation’ in only half of all occurrences, framing migration as the source of a serious threat to the material, political, and demographic stability and integrity, as well as the very identity of the country. On the other hand, non-domination informs ‘the EU matters’ narrative in slightly less than one-third of all instances. This corresponds not so much to the perception of a threat; for instance, the EU membership providing a corridor for both EU and third country immigrants, burdening social services, lowering salaries and competing (unfairly) for jobs. Rather, this narrative underlies how the UK sets itself squarely against the Union, which provides the opportunity to ‘get back to basics’ and re-establish the institutional and political settings that accounted for the ‘British exceptionalism’ (Hall 2011; Peterson 1999). In this sense, regaining full control of border protection and immigration management is a matter of ‘institutional’ soundness, and of going back to the ‘common sense’ criteria of British politics, necessarily at odds with the need for extraordinary coordination and institutional transformation required by EU membership. Similarly, non-domination associated with the ‘socio-economic’ narrative signals a preference for the day-to-day administration of migration policy, including financial resources, relying on national traditions and institutional resources rather than the ‘patronage’ of international regimes (Geddes and Scholten 2016; Joppke 1999).

As far as justice as impartiality is concerned, there is the expected peak of occurrences in narratives construing migration as a matter of protecting the vulnerable, be they asylum seekers and refugees whose status is guaranteed by international protection regimes, or other people deserving sanctuary and support. These are themes frequently debated on either side of the political spectrum, albeit to a higher degree in left-leaning newspapers such as *The Guardian*. They point out the country’s aloofness to the migration crisis, evidenced by the limited scope and magnitude of the Syrian refugee relocation programme, and the alleged progressive detachment from the legal and institutional structure upholding the international protection regimes (and today’s international order at large). On the other hand, justice as impartiality also informs a significant number of ‘the EU matters’ narratives. Arguably, there are two reasons for this. First, this claim provides a moral rationale for dealing with the myriad strongly-felt issues relative to British and EU citizens’ freedom of movement. Though largely unrelated to the migration crisis, these issues form a consistent part of the British debate on (im)migration. Second, the problem of how to provide asylum seekers with a safe haven despite domestic political and economic constraints is often observed through the lens of EU-related discourses. The so-called ‘jungle’ in Calais is important for understanding how a humanitarian

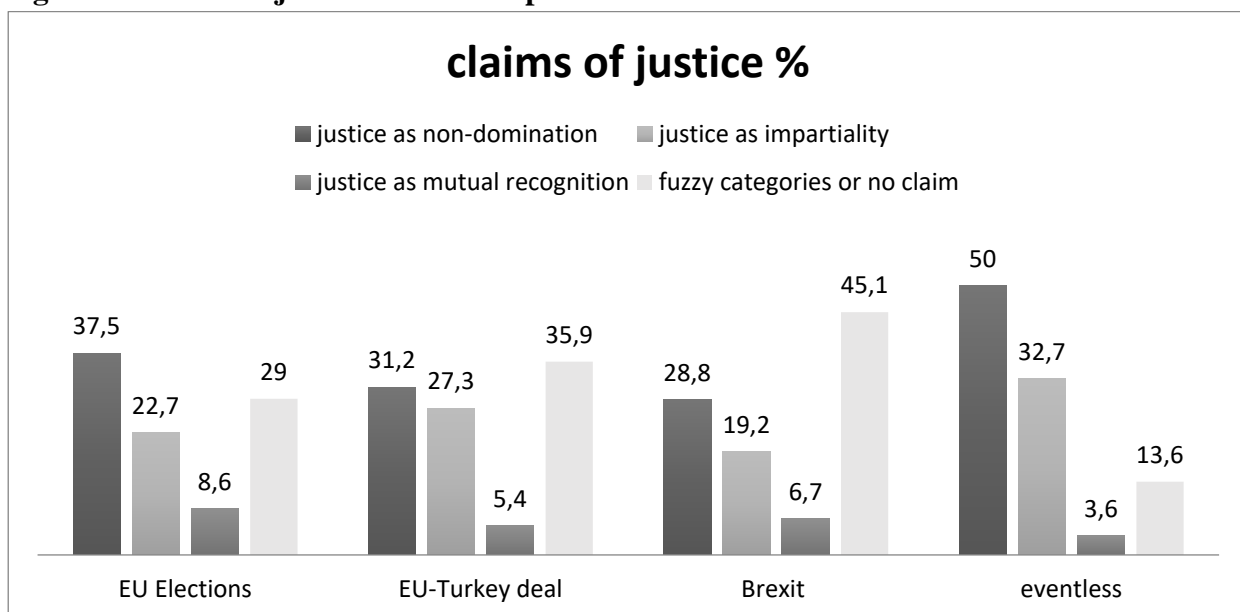
emergency tends to be expressed in terms of the country's relationship with the Common European Asylum System, which frequently blurs into a narrative about the EU as such.

The (relative) predominance of (im)migration-related narratives framing migrants as mere potential threats, or as the abstract subjects (i.e. holders of rights) of often flawed international protection regimes, creates an environment that is unreceptive of mutual recognition. According to this notion what is 'just' is not based on pre-determined criteria, but on immigrants and locals telling each other their experiences, expressing their individual and collective identities and developing connections between/within communities. Mutual recognition is not particularly pre-eminent in 'EU matters' narratives since it hinges mostly on issues such as policy responses to the repercussions of migration, opportunities and constraints of the EU membership, and party politics, showing little interest in the establishment of an inter-subjective dialogue. In the same vein, the 'threatened island' narratives have virtually no connection with this normative notion. Conversely, justice as mutual recognition emerges most frequently, albeit with a lower occurrence rate compared to other conceptions of justice, in narratives addressing migration as a socio-economic matter to the extent that they prove more sensitive to the concrete circumstances of the people involved in migration processes. Moreover, mutual recognition also informs 'migration as a question of humanity' narratives insofar considerations for the natural rights of people are complemented with an attention for their ordinary experiences as immigrants, and their relationship with locals.

### *Occurrences of conceptions of justice across periods*

There does not seem to be any dramatic shifts in the occurrence of the three claims of justice in the four periods. Even the 'outlier' weeks (those before and after the 2014 European Parliament elections) show similar overall percentages compared to the 2016-17 periods. Justice as non-domination remains the top-ranking claim, upheld by a robust association of the two most frequent narratives, while justice as impartiality also emerges quite considerably and consistently across all periods considered. The relatively marginal position of justice as mutual recognition varies very little.

**Figure 1: Claims of justice in the four periods**



Arguably, one of the reasons for the relative lack of variance of all justice claims in the various periods analysed is the British debate's strong focus on the domestic dimension, also because of the comparatively high degree of isolation from the migration crisis, and the more or less deliberate linkage of migration discourse to EU issues, which remained the centrepiece of national debates in all periods considered. Indeed, the kind of narratives and underlying justice claims in the press during the eventless week (January 2017) implies a further increase in attention dedicated to the domestic dimension of the migration phenomena. Paradoxically, further evidence of the increasing salience of "all that concerns the EU" at the very time the country was struggling to come up with a less binding (possibly not binding) relationship with it serves as a particularly compelling indication of Britain's deep Europeanisation of the immigration debate (Caviedes 2015; Pfetsch *et al.* 2008).

### **Conclusions: the UK and the EU as a normative actor**

The EU has become a progressively more prominent component of Britain's debate on migration, both as an actor and a topic, able to inform and polarise moral views underlying the most recurrent narratives in the media. The importance of this connection and the frustrations its intricacy generates can hardly be underestimated, with Brexit becoming one of the worst political – if not constitutional – crises in the country's recent history (Menon and Wager 2019). Whatever arrangements the UK and the EU will settle on along the continuum between full membership and arm's length collaboration, their current problematic relationship is likely to impact on the latter's normative consistency and efficacy in global politics. In its questioning of the freedom of movement within the Single Market – not to mention the Schengen area – Britain may not simply be re-asserting the pre-eminence of a Westphalian notion of justice (which would be nothing exceptional nor unwarranted among EU members). In fact, many British narratives also throw doubts on the very political and moral soundness of European integration as an opportunity for the MSs (and possibly other subjects) to have their voice heard. As a result, British public discourse may undermine the Union's endeavour to address claims of justice that deal in non-exclusionary terms with territorial borders both within and outside its boundaries.

This is not an inevitable outcome, as non-dominance, although at odds with supranational legal rules, does not *per se* imply an adversarial relationship with European partners, certainly not to the point of breaking established common institutions. Yet, a sizable share of the identified narratives challenges (with notable strength) not only the policy outcome of the integration process, but also its very normative premises. The discrepancy between the Union's endeavour to protect and promote global justice, on the one hand, and the disregard for it at home, on the other, undermines the legitimacy of EU foreign policy. The EU is represented as an unnatural (therefore unfair) contrivance rather than a 'political experiment' (Sjursen 2017, 2). This makes the integration process much less compelling as a 'new normality' to be offered to the rest of the world (Manners 2008), one in which cosmopolitan values can be balanced with Westphalian ones through carefully designed institutional arrangements. Failure to function as a normative actor is likely to have severe consequences when it comes to (im)migration issues, especially according to a notion of justice as mutual recognition. In a world in which the European experiment, also due to the UK's deliberately disruptive action, is unable to come up with new approaches to the enduring conflict between communitarian and cosmopolitan values, migrants as concrete people are bound to pay the price. Vulnerable as they are, migrants may well end up being overlooked or misconceived as just a stake in conflicts over interests and principles, with no real possibilities for substantial iniquities to be made right.



To conclude, while the UK case does not deviate from the expected pre-eminence of non-domination informing the national debate on (im)migration, the analysis has identified a number of specific features in the narratives emerging from the British press. The most notable are the strong connection between non-domination and narratives emphasising the salience of the EU in matters of migration, and the framing of non-domination in terms of restoring traditional ‘common sense’ in British politics. As for justice as impartiality, specific to the UK case is the relatively limited significance of the narrative with respect to the migration crisis (compared for instance to freedom of movement issues), often observed through the lens of EU-related discourses.

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