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Making Cooperation Possible: Narratives, Trust and Moral Frameworks in Europe's Asylum and Migration Debate

Executive Summary

Migration has become one of the most polarising issues in European public debate. While policy discussions often focus on legal frameworks, operational capacity or burden-sharing mechanisms, the ACRONYM project starts from a different premise: cooperation on asylum and migration fails not primarily because of missing instruments, but because it is frequently politically, morally and narratively impossible. Policies are negotiated and implemented in environments shaped by distrust, symbolic fears and incompatible moral frames. Without addressing these underlying dynamics, even well-designed policies risk rejection or distortion.

The ACRONYM project examined how migration is represented, interpreted and debated across Europe, with a particular focus on narratives, trusted intermediaries and moral frameworks. Drawing on comparative public opinion analysis, focus groups with Catholic laypeople across five countries, a survey among priests and religious leaders in Slovakia, and a series of policy dialogues, the project offers a novel perspective on why cooperation remains fragile and how it might be advanced.

A central finding is that migration debates across Europe are structured by different moral grammars. In some contexts, particularly in Western Europe, migration is predominantly framed as a governance challenge linked to administrative capacity, rights and integration. In parts of Central and Eastern Europe, it is more often interpreted through existential, cultural or identity-based lenses. These differences are not temporary misunderstandings, but stable features of political and cultural life. Cooperation falters when they are ignored and becomes possible only when they are made legible to one another.

ACRONYM's research also shows that migration debates are often driven less by lived experience than by symbolic dynamics. In contexts where direct contact with migrants is limited, public perceptions are shaped by what the project conceptualises as the "imaginary migrant": a symbolic figure constructed through political rhetoric, media narratives and identity-based fears. Policy responses that focus exclusively on managing real migration flows therefore often miss the political problem entirely.



The project further highlights the political importance of selective empathy. The response to the war in Ukraine demonstrated that large-scale solidarity is possible, but also conditional. Public support for refugees varies depending on perceived proximity, familiarity and legitimacy. When these dynamics are ignored, cooperation risks being undermined by resentment and accusations of double standards.

A distinctive contribution of ACRONYM is its demonstration that religion functions as a key part of the moral infrastructure shaping migration debates. Religious frameworks continue to influence how migration is morally evaluated, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe but also within wider European political dynamics. Churches and religious leaders do not simply transmit political messages; they interpret them, mediate moral tension and influence how communities reconcile universal ethical principles with local anxieties. Religious actors are neither automatic allies nor inherent obstacles to cooperation. Their potential to moderate polarisation depends on context, credibility and institutional support.

Across the research and policy dialogues, trust emerged as the scarcest resource in migration governance. Declining confidence in political institutions, media and European-level actors shapes how migration policies are received, regardless of their substance. In this environment, cooperation cannot rely on institutional communication alone. Trusted intermediaries, including journalists, educators, civil society and religious actors, play a critical role in translating complex policies into locally meaningful frames.

The ACRONYM project concludes that cooperation on asylum and migration advances when certain conditions are met: recognition of different moral starting points, engagement with imagined as well as lived migration, transparent management of selective solidarity, rebuilding trust through credible intermediaries, and a shift from messaging to interpretive capacity. Legal and operational reforms remain necessary, but they are insufficient on their own. Without attention to how migration is morally framed and socially interpreted, cooperation risks remaining fragile.

By foregrounding narratives, moral frameworks and the role of religious actors as interpreters rather than instruments, ACRONYM offers a complementary approach to migration governance in Europe, one that seeks to make cooperation politically viable and socially sustainable in a fragmented and polarised landscape.

This paper draws on Eurobarometer data, original qualitative research conducted within the ACRONYM project, including focus groups and surveys, as well as existing academic and policy literature on migration narratives, public opinion and governance



I. Introduction

Migration has become one of the most politically charged issues in contemporary Europe. Although Europe receives far fewer migrants and asylum seekers than many other regions in the world, migration routinely dominates electoral debates, reshapes party systems and fuels deep societal polarisation. This gap between demographic reality and political intensity reveals a crucial fact: what drives Europe's migration debate is not numbers but representations.

Across the continent, public attitudes are shaped less by direct contact with migrants than by the stories, images and moral arguments that circulate through political messaging, media environments and trusted community voices. These representations are emotionally charged, historically conditioned and remarkably persistent. Once established, they act as powerful filters that determine whether newcomers are perceived as neighbours in need, potential contributors or cultural threats.

This dynamic is especially visible in Central and Eastern Europe. Countries that host few asylum seekers and where everyday encounters with migrants are rare often express the strongest fears. Migration becomes a symbol of external pressure or cultural vulnerability more than a concrete social reality. Yet the extraordinary solidarity shown towards Ukrainians after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 revealed the other side of the story. The same societies that reject migration in abstract terms can mobilise compassion at an unprecedented scale when displacement is framed through familiarity, proximity and shared history. The contrast between these responses highlights how selective and context dependent empathy can be.

Understanding these patterns requires turning attention not only to institutions and policies but also to faith, values and moral authority, dimensions that are often overlooked in policy analysis. In many European countries, and particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, churches remain among the most trusted institutions. Sermons, pastoral guidance and Church teaching shape how people think about responsibility, justice and solidarity. Priests speak to congregations that may have limited access to first-hand information about migration, and their interpretations can soften or harden the tone of local debate. Yet despite this influence, the role of religious actors in shaping public perceptions of migration remains underexplored in policy analysis.

The ACRONYM project set out to address this gap. Alongside a comparative analysis of Eurobarometer data tracing the evolution of public opinion on migration in France, Germany and the Visegrad countries, the project examined how faith and religious leadership influence perceptions and narratives. To do so, ACRONYM conducted:



- **A survey with priests** in Slovakia, exploring how clergy understand migration, what moral tensions they experience and how prepared they feel to address these issues with their communities.
- **Focus groups with Catholic laypeople** in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, France and Italy, designed to understand how practising believers perceive migrants and refugees, how they interpret Church teachings on hospitality and protection and how they reconcile these teachings with dominant public narratives.
- **Policy dialogues** in Bratislava and Paris, bringing together policymakers, journalists, researchers, Catholic clergy and civil society actors to reflect on the drivers of polarisation and the potential role of religious institutions in moderating it.

These activities revealed a landscape in which migration is not only a political or administrative challenge but also a moral and interpretive one. They showed that religious actors can reinforce fear-based narratives when they themselves feel uncertain or unsupported, but they can also become powerful allies in fostering empathy, correcting misinformation and rebuilding public trust.

This policy paper synthesises ACRONYM’s insights to clarify how public attitudes toward migration are formed across different European contexts and what role faith-based actors can play in shaping them. Its premise is simple: if Europe wants a more rational, constructive and socially sustainable migration debate, it must take seriously the voices that people actually trust. Churches are not the only such voices, but in many parts of Europe they remain uniquely influential. Recognising their ambivalent yet significant role is essential for any meaningful effort to move Europe’s migration conversation from polarisation toward a more grounded and humane understanding of human mobility.

II. Mapping the Perception Landscape: How Europeans See Migration

Public attitudes toward migration in Europe do not follow the logic of exposure. They are shaped more by narratives, emotions and historical memories than by the actual number of people arriving. Drawing on a decade of Eurobarometer data (Eurobarometer surveys, 2014–2024) and complemented by ACRONYM’s qualitative work through focus groups, this section highlights the main features of Europe’s perception landscape and explains why debate remains so polarised.

1. High salience in places with low exposure

Eurobarometer data show that migration rose sharply as a public concern after 2015, but the most dramatic increases occurred in countries with very low levels of immigration. Slovakia,



Hungary and the Czech Republic saw immigration rise rapidly among top public concerns despite not being major destination countries. Germany, which did receive large numbers of asylum seekers, also experienced a peak, followed by stabilisation.

Poland and Slovakia did not treat migration as a top-tier concern, yet both experienced a noticeable rise in salience in 2015. In Slovakia the share of respondents naming immigration as a priority rose from 1 percent in 2014 to 19 percent in 2015; in Poland it increased from 7 percent to 17 percent. While these levels never reached the peaks observed in Hungary or Czechia, they illustrate how perceptions can escalate even where exposure is minimal.

This pattern confirms a broader finding: the salience of migration reflects its symbolic role in politics and media rather than demographic realities. In much of Central Europe, the idea of a migration crisis entered public consciousness before significant numbers of migrants arrived.

2. Emotional volatility and the power of events

Public attitudes toward migration shift rapidly in response to emotionally charged events. The image of Alan Kurdi temporarily softened views in parts of Western Europe, while the Cologne New Year's Eve assaults triggered a sharp security-oriented turn. Social media environments amplify these dynamics by privileging sensational imagery over contextual information.

The displacement caused by the war in Ukraine in 2022 provides a contrasting example. Sympathy for Ukrainians surged almost immediately in Poland and Slovakia, where they were perceived as neighbours seeking protection rather than as migrants. This openness, however, proved highly selective and uneven over time, illustrating how fragile compassion can be when it is not supported by consistent framing and institutional communication.

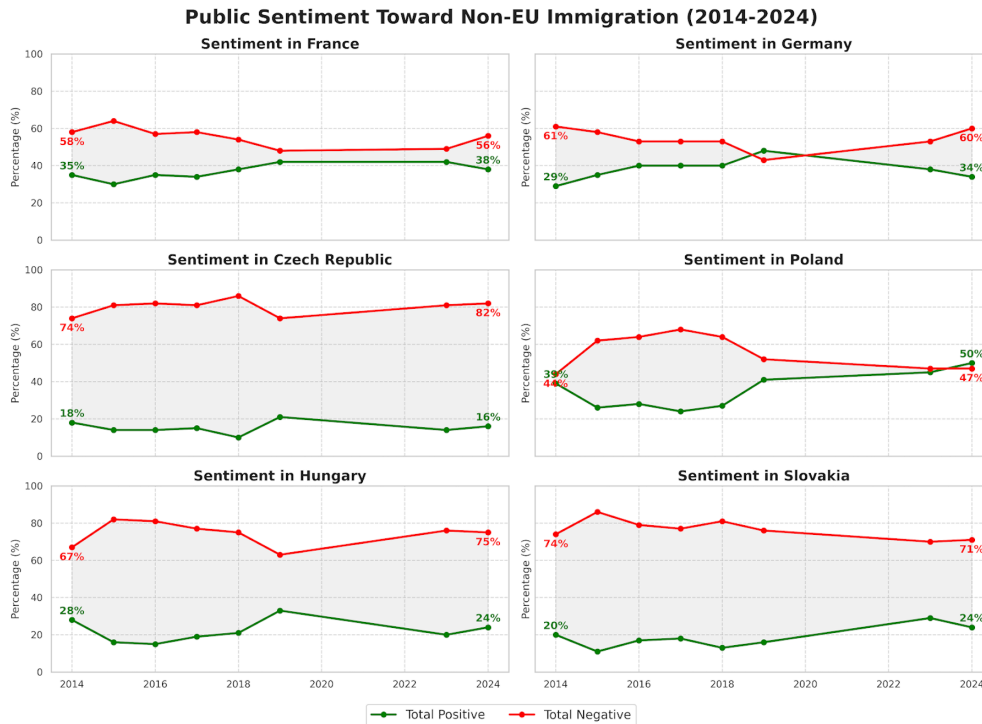
3. A persistent East West divide

A long-standing divergence separates Western and Central Europe. In France and Germany, attitudes toward immigration are mixed and fluctuate depending on political context, but rarely reach the consistently high levels of negativity observed in Slovakia, Hungary and Czechia. In these countries, negative sentiment toward non-EU immigration often exceeds seventy percent and has remained elevated for nearly a decade.

This divide cannot be explained by asylum numbers alone. Rather, it reflects historical experiences, limited cultural diversity, post-1989 nation-building narratives and the use of migration by political elites as a symbol of external pressure or cultural erosion. Poland occupies a more nuanced position. While attitudes toward non-EU immigration hardened after 2015, they remain less negative than in other V4 countries, possibly reflecting longstanding Ukrainian labour migration and greater social familiarity.

Figure 1. Persistent East West divergence in attitudes toward non-EU immigration (Eurobarometer 2016–2024)





(Based on data from the Eurobarometer Surveys 82-102)

4. Perceived contribution and the logic of categorisation

Eurobarometer data on the perceived contribution of immigrants, available since 2018, reveal a clear pattern. Western Europeans are more likely to view immigrants as contributing positively to society, while disagreement dominates in the V4 countries, often exceeding seventy percent in Slovakia, Hungary and Czechia.

Poland again stands out, with more balanced perceptions. The arrival of Ukrainians after 2022 appears to have softened attitudes in Poland and, to a lesser extent, Slovakia. Although Eurobarometer does not distinguish between Ukrainians and other third-country nationals, ACRONYM’s focus groups confirm that many Poles and Slovaks treat Ukrainians as a distinct category, closer to EU citizens and perceived as economically contributing. This selective categorisation helps explain why public reactions differ sharply across migrant groups.

5. How Catholic believers interpret migration

ACRONYM’s focus groups with Catholic laypeople in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, France and Italy show that believers interpret migration through moral, cultural and political lenses shaped by national contexts. Although participants frequently referred to Christian values of compassion, their attitudes largely mirrored dominant national narratives.



In Central and Eastern Europe, migration was overwhelmingly framed as a cultural and civilisational threat despite very limited exposure. Participants expressed fears of religious replacement, erosion of Christian identity and loss of national cohesion, often invoking sharia law or externally imposed social change. Several acknowledged that migrants were largely absent from their societies, yet still expressed anxiety about “imaginary migrants” shaped by political rhetoric and sensationalist media. Migration was frequently described as something imposed from outside, whether by European institutions or Western political elites. In this context, Catholicism functioned primarily as a marker of cultural belonging closely tied to national identity.

Western European participants interpreted migration differently. Rather than a threat to religious identity, migration was seen as a structural reality raising challenges for social cohesion, public services and state capacity. Catholic identity operated mainly as a moral resource encouraging solidarity, but this impulse was often tempered by expectations of reciprocity, integration and institutional responsibility. While participants valued the humanitarian role of the Church, they questioned its authority when it appeared to advance universalist positions detached from practical constraints.

Across all countries, a common pattern emerged: selective adherence to religious authority. Pope Francis’s emphasis on welcoming migrants was widely recognised but often described as applicable only “up to a point”. Ethical principles were acknowledged, but consistently filtered through concerns about limits, capacity and national context. Solidarity emerged most clearly when suffering was visible and relatable, as in the case of Ukrainians, but remained conditional and selective.

These findings underline that Catholic believers do not reject compassion, but interpret it through national narratives, threat perceptions and experiences of state capacity. Factual information alone does not override these moral and cultural frames, highlighting the importance of narrative mediation and trusted intermediaries in shaping public understanding.

6. Implications for the wider debate

Together, these findings show that European migration debates are shaped by symbolic dynamics, selective empathy and deeply rooted historical frames. Attitudes cannot be explained by flows or statistics alone. People interpret migration through moral categories that define who is seen as deserving, who is perceived as threatening and which forms of mobility trigger solidarity.

This has direct implications for policymaking and communication. Information alone rarely corrects misperceptions unless it engages with the moral frameworks through which migration is understood, particularly in societies with limited everyday contact with migrants. This helps explain why trusted intermediaries matter and why the next section turns to the actors who shape migration narratives, with particular attention to the Catholic Church in contexts where attitudes remain especially resistant to change.



III. Actors Who Shape the Migration Debate

Migration perceptions do not emerge spontaneously. They are shaped by a constellation of actors who interpret events, frame narratives and help people orient themselves in moments of uncertainty. While media and political leaders play visible roles, ACRONYM's research suggests that trusted intermediaries, and particularly the Catholic Church in many European contexts, hold considerable potential to shape how migration is morally and socially understood. This potential becomes especially relevant where direct contact with migrants is limited and where people rely on moral or community authorities to make sense of complex or unfamiliar issues. This section outlines the main categories of actors who structure the debate and explains why the Church merits particular attention in contexts where its authority remains comparatively high.

1. Political actors

Political leaders are central in defining the tone and vocabulary of migration debates. Their choices influence whether migration is presented as a crisis, a humanitarian responsibility or a manageable social and economic reality. Political incentives often favour alarmist rhetoric, as narratives of threat tend to mobilise voters more effectively than balanced assessments. In several Central and Eastern European countries, migration has become a symbolic issue used to signal sovereignty, cultural defence or distance from Brussels, even in contexts with limited immigration.

This politicisation shapes public attitudes regardless of migration levels. When political discourse consistently frames migration as a security or cultural threat, it provides the interpretive grid through which people make sense of unfamiliar information or isolated events. In Western Europe, by contrast, political messaging more often situates migration within debates on integration, welfare and institutional capacity. These different frames generate distinct expectations of migrants and different thresholds of concern.

2. Media, digital platforms and the amplification of narratives

If political actors set the tone of migration debates, media and digital platforms largely shape their emotional intensity. Migration is particularly sensitive to framing. When presented primarily as a humanitarian issue, public attitudes tend to be more open, while crisis framing, exceptional incidents and security-oriented narratives harden perceptions (Thiollet, 2025). This dynamic was consistently highlighted in ACRONYM's analytical work and project activities.

The project's review of media literature, combined with exchanges during journalism trainings and policy dialogues, points to a structural rather than intentional problem. News coverage privileges dramatic and visually powerful events such as border confrontations, shipwrecks or political standoffs. While newsworthy, their prominence creates a distorted picture in which



exceptional situations come to stand in for broader migration realities. Everyday processes of integration and long-term social dynamics receive far less attention.

Participants in the Bratislava policy dialogues emphasised how such patterns shaped public perceptions in Slovakia, particularly during periods of heightened attention in 2015 and again in 2022. They described information environments saturated with emotionally charged images, simplified narratives and, at times, misleading or fabricated content circulating through social media channels. Confusion about basic migration categories became widespread, especially among audiences with little direct experience of migrants.

Digital platforms further intensify these effects. Algorithm-driven recommendation systems reward engagement and emotional reaction, favouring sensational or polarising content. Contextual explanations and factual clarifications therefore struggle to achieve comparable reach. This helps explain why fear-based perceptions can persist even when empirical data contradicts them.

At the same time, ACRONYM's engagement with journalists shows that media actors are not only amplifiers of polarisation but also potential agents of recalibration. Journalism trainings revealed strong interest, particularly among early career journalists, in ethical reporting, rights-based terminology and strategies to address mis- and disinformation. While journalism alone cannot depolarise migration debates, targeted capacity building can help media contribute to more proportionate and contextualised coverage.

3. Trusted intermediaries

Trusted intermediaries help communities interpret uncertain or emotionally charged issues. They include teachers, local officials, civil society actors and religious communities, though their influence varies widely depending on historical experience, institutional trust and local networks. In many European contexts where religious identity retains social importance, the Catholic Church stands out as an intermediary with notable potential influence.

3.1. Why trusted intermediaries matter

People interpret migration not only through information but through moral frameworks and relational contexts that give information meaning. When political and media narratives feel overwhelming or inconsistent, intermediaries help individuals navigate ambiguity. They translate abstract principles into local terms and can either moderate or reinforce anxiety depending on their own understanding and the confidence communities place in them. This interpretive role is especially important in settings with limited first-hand contact with migrants.

3.2. The Catholic Church as a moral and social intermediary

ACRONYM's research indicates that the Catholic Church has significant potential to influence how migration is understood at community level, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe.



Priests occupy positions of moral and relational authority, and their homilies, pastoral conversations and community work provide interpretive cues that many believers trust. However, the extent of this influence varies widely and depends on confidence, knowledge and local parish dynamics.

Priests are not passive conveyors of doctrine. They act as moral interpreters navigating tensions between Gospel imperatives, national narratives and local anxieties. In Slovakia, survey results reveal pronounced ambivalence. Many priests express concern about immigration and endorse alarmist frames portraying Europe as overwhelmed, while simultaneously demonstrating strong pastoral commitment through direct involvement in assisting refugees. This combination illustrates the contradictory pressures clergy face and shows that their influence on public attitudes can point in different directions depending on context.

In France, the interpretive landscape differs. Priests generally reject cultural alarmism and do not perceive migration as a threat to Christianity. Their concerns focus on practical challenges related to integration, administrative capacity and parish resources. While they value hospitality, they express unease with the political instrumentalisation of Christianity. Even in this context, clergy face uneven institutional support and varying degrees of confidence in addressing migration publicly.

Across countries, a shared pattern emerges. Priests often describe the Vatican's universal call for hospitality as morally compelling but difficult to implement without adequate resources, training or diocesan coordination. Some feel under-equipped or isolated, while others become strong advocates for migrants but note the emotional and administrative burdens involved. These variations show that the Church's influence is shaped less by doctrine than by local contexts and institutional capacity.

3.3. Why the Church merits attention in migration policymaking

The potential influence of the Catholic Church derives not only from its teachings but from its embeddedness in social life. Priests are present in communities where policymakers often struggle to establish dialogue, speak regularly to diverse audiences and help shape moral vocabularies around deservingness, responsibility and threat. They are also among the few actors who retain a degree of trust in societies where confidence in political and media institutions has eroded.

Because this influence is context dependent rather than automatic, engagement requires nuance. When priests feel informed, supported and confident, they can help lower the emotional temperature of migration debates and encourage more grounded understanding. When they feel overwhelmed or uncertain, they may inadvertently reinforce polarising narratives or withdraw from public discussion. Recognising this dual potential is essential for designing strategies that aim to rebuild trust, bridge social divides and foster more constructive public conversations on migration.



IV. Narratives That Bind and Narratives That Divide

Public debates on migration are shaped less by facts than by the narratives through which those facts are interpreted. Narratives provide meaning. They define who belongs, who deserves protection, who is perceived as a threat and who is seen as a responsibility. Once established, they structure public debate by simplifying complex realities into emotionally resonant frames that travel easily across political, media and social arenas.

ACRONYM's research shows that migration narratives in Europe are neither uniform nor static. They vary across regions and evolve in response to political events, media dynamics and moral frameworks. Crucially, they are filtered through cultural and religious reference points that shape how migration is understood at community level.

1. Crisis, threat and deservingness

One of the most persistent narrative frames across Europe presents migration as a crisis. This frame emphasises urgency, loss of control and exceptional circumstances. It relies on images of borders under pressure, overwhelmed institutions and sudden demographic change. While such imagery often reflects isolated moments rather than structural realities, it has proven highly effective in shaping public perceptions.

Closely linked to crisis framing is the logic of threat. In Central and Eastern Europe, ACRONYM's findings show that this threat is often articulated in cultural or civilisational terms. Migration is described as a danger to national identity, Christian heritage or social cohesion, even in contexts where migrants are largely absent. In Western Europe, threat narratives take a different form. Concerns focus more on institutional capacity, welfare systems and integration rather than on identity or religion. These differences matter because they shape what kinds of policy responses are perceived as legitimate.

Across both contexts, narratives of deservingness play a central role. Not all migrants are seen equally. Ukrainians, for example, were widely framed as deserving protection due to perceived proximity, shared history and visible victimhood. Other groups, particularly from the Middle East or Africa, were more often portrayed as economically motivated or culturally distant. This hierarchy of deservingness helps explain why solidarity can be widespread in one context and absent in another, even when humanitarian needs are comparable.

Textbox 1. Recurrent Narrative Frames Shaping Migration Debates in Europe

ACRONYM identifies several recurring narrative frames that structure how migration is perceived and debated across Europe. These narratives are not mutually exclusive and often overlap, but together they help explain why migration debates are emotionally charged, resistant to factual correction and prone to polarisation.



Health threat narratives

Migration is framed as a risk to public health, portraying migrants as carriers of disease or as bypassing health controls. During the COVID-19 pandemic, such narratives intensified, personalising fear and legitimising exclusionary responses while undermining trust in public authorities and healthcare systems (Butcher & Neidhardt, 2020; Szakács & Bognár, 2021).

Economic burden narratives

Migrants are depicted as competitors for jobs or disproportionate beneficiaries of welfare systems. By mobilising economic anxiety, these narratives weaken social solidarity and fuel support for restrictive migration and asylum policies (Butcher & Neidhardt, 2021; EDMO, 2023; GLOBSEC, 2024).

Cultural and identity threat narratives

One of the most emotionally powerful frames presents migration as a challenge to national, cultural or religious identity. Migrants, particularly Muslims, are portrayed as unwilling to integrate or as imposing incompatible values. Research shows that identity-based narratives polarise rapidly and are especially resistant to factual correction (Neidhardt, 2022; Hargrave et al., 2023).

Criminalisation narratives

Migrants are associated with crime, violence or terrorism despite consistent empirical evidence showing no systematic link. This narrative persists due to the amplification of isolated incidents through media coverage and political rhetoric, reinforcing perceptions of insecurity (ISD, 2022; EDMO, 2023).

“Good versus bad refugees” narratives

Public debates often construct hierarchies of deservingness. Ukrainians have frequently been framed as culturally proximate and legitimate refugees, while people fleeing conflicts in the Middle East or Africa are portrayed as less deserving or even threatening. This selective framing produces uneven empathy and entrenches double standards in public attitudes and policy responses (GLOBSEC, 2022; Sales, 2023).

Migration as a geopolitical instrument

Particularly salient in Central and Eastern Europe, this narrative depicts migration as a tool of deliberate destabilisation orchestrated by external actors. Migrants are framed not as individuals in need but as instruments of hybrid warfare, reinforcing securitised responses and deepening distrust in institutions (Nestoras, 2019; Rogalewicz, 2022).

Source: ACRONYM analytical work



2. Faith, morality and selective empathy

Religion plays a complex role in these narratives. ACRONYM's focus groups with Catholic laypeople reveal that Christian values of compassion and solidarity remain widely recognised, but their application is highly conditional. Believers across Europe often expressed moral discomfort with rejecting people in need, yet simultaneously articulated fears or reservations shaped by national narratives.

In Central and Eastern Europe, Catholic identity frequently functions as a cultural boundary marker. Christianity is invoked as something to be protected rather than mobilised as a universal moral obligation. In this context, migration narratives are filtered through a lens of defence and preservation. Compassion is often reserved for those perceived as part of a broader Christian or European community.

In Western Europe, Catholic identity operates more as a moral resource than a marker of belonging. Believers are generally more open to humanitarian arguments, but their support is constrained by concerns about integration, social cohesion and institutional capacity. Across both regions, empathy is selective and situational. It intensifies when suffering is visible and relatable and recedes when migration is framed abstractly or politically (Fassin, 2012).

3. The tension between universal messages and local realities

A recurrent theme in ACRONYM's research is the tension between universal moral messages and local interpretive frameworks. The Catholic Church's emphasis on welcoming and protecting migrants articulates a clear ethical position, yet its reception varies widely. Many believers admire the moral clarity of this message while simultaneously questioning its applicability in their national or local contexts.

This tension produces selective adherence. Universalist messages are accepted in principle but resisted in practice when they appear disconnected from perceived realities or risks. In some cases, they are dismissed as naive or overly idealistic. This dynamic helps explain why religious discourse does not automatically moderate polarisation and why moral appeals alone often fail to change attitudes (Marzouki, McDonnell & Roy, 2016).

The same tension is visible in secular narratives. Appeals to human rights or international obligations can clash with local perceptions of fairness, capacity or cultural continuity. When such narratives are perceived as imposed rather than dialogical, they risk reinforcing resistance rather than fostering understanding.

4. How narratives travel and persist

Migration narratives travel across political speeches, media coverage and community conversations. They are reinforced when similar frames appear across multiple arenas and when trusted voices repeat them. In contexts with limited direct experience of migrants,



mediated narratives become especially powerful, filling the gap left by the absence of everyday interaction.

Once embedded, narratives are remarkably resilient. Corrections and counter narratives struggle to gain traction when they conflict with deeply held beliefs or identities. This does not mean narratives are immutable, but it does mean that change is gradual and context dependent. Moments of rupture, such as humanitarian crises or sudden displacement, can open windows for reframing, but these windows close quickly if narratives are not sustained by credible actors and consistent communication.

ACRONYM's findings suggest that narratives shift most effectively when moral language, factual information and lived experience align. When they diverge, polarisation deepens.

5. Implications for policymaking

Understanding migration narratives is essential for designing effective policy and communication strategies. Policies that ignore dominant narratives risk misinterpretation or backlash, regardless of their technical merits. Conversely, policies that engage with narratives without reinforcing fear can help create space for more constructive debate.

This requires recognising that narratives are shaped by more than political messaging. They are embedded in cultural memory, religious identity and moral reasoning. Addressing polarisation therefore demands approaches that combine factual clarity with moral credibility and local relevance. Trusted intermediaries, including religious actors where appropriate, can play a role in translating policy objectives into frames that resonate with community values.

The next section draws on insights from the ACRONYM policy dialogues to explore how these dynamics played out in practice and what they reveal about the possibilities and limits of depolarising migration debates in Europe.

V. What the ACRONYM Policy Dialogues Reveal About Europe's Migration Debate

The ACRONYM policy dialogues, held in Bratislava in July 2023 and June 2024 and in Paris in December 2025, brought together policymakers, researchers, journalists, civil society actors and religious representatives to reflect on how migration is debated, interpreted and governed in Europe. Taken together, these exchanges offer insight into the deeper dynamics that sustain polarisation, as well as into the conditions under which more constructive public debate becomes possible.



1. Polarisation is sustained by moral narratives and crowded by extremes

Across all three dialogues, participants repeatedly returned to the observation that migration debates are shaped not only by political incentives or policy disagreements, but by moral narratives about responsibility, fairness and belonging. These narratives define the emotional boundaries of debate and often crowd out moderate or pragmatic positions. Dialogue participants noted that public discussion is frequently dominated by two opposing poles, while more nuanced perspectives struggle to gain visibility.

This dynamic is particularly pronounced in contexts where migration is experienced more as a symbol than as a lived reality. In such settings, anxieties surrounding migration become proxies for broader concerns about identity, sovereignty and social change. Once framed in moral or existential terms, migration debates become resistant to factual correction. Participants stressed that this helps explain why even well-designed policies can struggle to gain acceptance when they clash with dominant moral frames.

2. Confusion about migration categories is widespread and consequential

A second consistent insight concerned the persistent confusion between different forms of mobility. Refugees, asylum seekers, labour migrants and people fleeing war are frequently conflated in public debate. Participants across dialogues emphasised that this confusion is not merely a lack of information, but a structural outcome of politicised communication and fragmented media environments.

This lack of differentiation has concrete consequences. It increases vulnerability to disinformation, reinforces unrealistic expectations of immediate control and allows exceptional incidents to shape perceptions of entire groups. It also undermines institutional credibility when policy measures appear inconsistent with public understanding. Dialogue participants stressed that improving clarity around migration categories is therefore not a technical exercise, but a prerequisite for rebuilding trust and enabling meaningful public discussion.

3. Trust is the scarcest resource in migration governance

The dialogues consistently highlighted the erosion of trust as a central challenge. In many contexts, citizens do not trust political actors to communicate honestly about migration, nor do they trust media environments to provide proportional coverage. In Central Europe, distrust frequently extends to European institutions perceived as distant or imposing. In Western Europe, it is more often linked to perceptions of institutional incapacity and governance failure.



As trust in formal institutions erodes, participants noted that people increasingly rely on informal networks, personal experience and moral authorities when interpreting migration.

4. Religion reveals a crisis of narrative rather than a crisis of numbers

One of the most distinctive contributions of the ACRONYM dialogues emerged from discussions involving religious actors, particularly during the Paris dialogue. Participants articulated a shared diagnosis that Europe is facing less a crisis of numbers than a crisis of narrative. Migration pressures were widely acknowledged, but the dominant narratives through which they are interpreted were seen as amplifying fear, moral confusion and political paralysis.

The dialogues confirmed that religion is neither a simple solution nor a marginal factor. Church actors can reinforce polarisation when religious identity is mobilised defensively or politically. At the same time, faith communities retain moral credibility and social reach in contexts where other institutions struggle to engage citizens. However, religious authority does not automatically translate into moderating influence. Clergy are themselves embedded in national narratives and often experience moral strain, navigating between universal ethical calls, bureaucratic constraints and local anxieties.

Participants stressed that without institutional support, training and coordination, religious actors' capacity to contribute constructively remains limited. Education emerged repeatedly as a missing hinge, linking moral principles, policy realities and public understanding. Where this link is absent, even strong moral messages struggle to translate into practice.

5. Selective empathy shapes public responses and policy reception

A further insight concerned the uneven distribution of solidarity. The response to Ukrainians demonstrated that empathy can be mobilised rapidly and at scale, but also that it is shaped by proximity, familiarity and perceived legitimacy. Participants noted the paradox that some countries managed the arrival of large numbers of Ukrainian refugees effectively despite previously hostile attitudes toward migration.

This selective empathy creates political tensions. It can generate resentment when certain groups are perceived as receiving preferential treatment and harden attitudes toward those framed as culturally distant. Dialogue participants stressed that policy communication must anticipate these dynamics rather than deny them. Ignoring hierarchies of deservingness risks undermining credibility, while reinforcing them risks entrenching exclusion. More constructive approaches acknowledge public concerns while consistently articulating principles of protection, fairness and responsibility.



6. Conditions for more constructive debate

Despite deep disagreements, the dialogues also identified conditions under which migration debates become less polarised. Participants converged on several enabling factors.

First, communication is more effective when factual clarity is combined with moral credibility. Facts alone rarely change minds, but facts framed within shared values of responsibility and fairness resonate more strongly.

Second, trust building works best at local level. People are more open to nuance when messages come through familiar actors and connect to lived experience rather than abstract policy language.

Third, coherence matters. Contradictory signals from national governments, European institutions and local authorities create space for suspicion and confusion. Clear responsibilities and consistent terminology reduce perceptions of chaos.

Finally, the dialogues highlighted the importance of professional capacity building. Journalists, educators, civil society actors and religious leaders all face real constraints in how they communicate about migration. Strengthening their ability to engage with complexity, address disinformation and translate policy into accessible language emerged as one of the most practical levers available to policymakers.

Taken together, the ACRONYM policy dialogues show that depolarising migration debates is less about finding the right message and more about shaping the conditions under which people interpret migration. Trust, moral framing, credible intermediaries and coherent communication are central. The following section translates these insights into concrete policy recommendations.

VI. Advancing Cooperation on Asylum and Migration: Lessons from ACRONYM

The ACRONYM project was premised on a simple but demanding insight: cooperation on asylum and migration in Europe does not fail primarily because of missing legal instruments or insufficient data, but because cooperation is often politically, morally and narratively impossible. Policies are negotiated and implemented in environments shaped by distrust, symbolic fears and incompatible moral frames. Advancing cooperation therefore requires more than technical alignment. It requires creating the conditions under which cooperation becomes legitimate, intelligible and sustainable across diverse European contexts.



Based on its comparative research, policy dialogues and engagement with media and religious actors, ACRONYM identifies five conditions that are critical for advancing cooperation on asylum and migration in Europe.

1. Cooperation requires recognising different moral starting points

ACRONYM's research shows that European debates on migration are structured by different moral grammars. In some contexts, particularly in Western Europe, migration is predominantly discussed through the language of governance capacity, rights and institutional effectiveness. In parts of Central and Eastern Europe, migration is more often interpreted through existential, cultural or identity-based frames. These differences are not transitional misunderstandings but stable features of national political cultures.

Cooperation is undermined when these moral starting points are ignored or dismissed. Attempts to advance common solutions through normative pressure or moralising language often reinforce resistance rather than reducing it. Cooperation advances when actors understand how migration is interpreted in other contexts and when policy discussions are framed in ways that acknowledge these differences rather than deny them.

2. Cooperation requires addressing imagined migration, not only lived migration

In several European contexts, public attitudes towards migration are shaped less by direct experience than by what ACRONYM conceptualises as the “imaginary migrant”: a symbolic figure constructed through political rhetoric, media narratives and identity-based fears. In such settings, migration is experienced as a threat even in the absence of significant migration flows.

Cooperation falters when policy responses focus exclusively on managing real migration dynamics while leaving imagined migration unaddressed. Measures designed for contexts of lived migration often fail to resonate where migration is primarily symbolic. Advancing cooperation therefore requires recognising whether debates are driven by experience or imagination and adapting policy communication and engagement strategies accordingly.

3. Cooperation requires managing selective solidarity openly

The response to the war in Ukraine demonstrated that large scale solidarity is possible, but also that empathy is selective. Public support for refugees is shaped by perceived proximity, familiarity and legitimacy. This selectivity creates political tensions and can undermine cooperation when solidarity appears uneven or arbitrary.



Ignoring selective empathy weakens trust, while instrumentalising it risks entrenching exclusion. Cooperation advances when policymakers acknowledge these dynamics openly, explain policy choices transparently and avoid framing solidarity as a zero-sum game between different groups of migrants and refugees.

4. Cooperation requires rebuilding trust through credible intermediaries

Across ACRONYM's research and policy dialogues, trust emerged as the scarcest resource in migration governance. Distrust in political institutions, media and European level actors shapes how policies are received, regardless of their content. In this context, cooperation cannot rely on institutional communication alone.

Trusted intermediaries, including journalists, educators, civil society actors and religious communities, play a critical role in how migration is interpreted at community level. Their influence is not automatic and varies by context, but where they retain credibility, they can help translate complex policies into locally meaningful frames. Cooperation advances when these actors are engaged as partners rather than treated as instruments.

5. Cooperation requires shifting from messaging to interpretive capacity

ACRONYM's findings consistently show that facts alone rarely depolarise migration debates. What matters is not only what institutions communicate, but who helps societies interpret what is happening. When interpretive capacity is weak, factual corrections fail, and polarisation deepens.

Advancing cooperation therefore requires investment in the ability of key actors to engage with complexity, uncertainty and moral disagreement. This includes supporting spaces for dialogue, reflection and learning that allow societies to process migration as a long-term reality rather than as a permanent crisis.

In a European political landscape where faith-informed moral vocabularies remain influential, ignoring the religious dimension of migration narratives risks leaving moral interpretation to polarising voices.

From conditions to policy action

These conditions have concrete implications for policy design and implementation. Advancing cooperation on asylum and migration requires:

- **Investing in education and interpretive capacity**, particularly in relation to migration categories, legal frameworks and the distinction between lived and imagined migration, and strengthening the ability of trusted intermediaries, including journalists,



educators and religious actors, to translate migration and asylum policies into moral languages that resonate with different communities.

- **Strengthening professional capacity** among journalists, educators, civil society and faith-based actors to engage responsibly with migration, counter disinformation and communicate proportionately.
- **Designing context sensitive communication strategies** that start from nationally salient concerns rather than importing frames from other European settings.
- **Supporting local level encounters and initiatives** that foster direct interaction with migrants and refugees, as lived experience consistently moderates attitudes more effectively than abstract messaging.
- **Improving institutional coherence and transparency**, as contradictory signals from different levels of governance undermine trust and cooperation.

These measures do not replace legal or operational reforms, but they shape the conditions under which such reforms can gain legitimacy and endure. Advancing cooperation on asylum and migration depends as much on trust, interpretation and moral credibility as on policy design.

The table below illustrates selected policy actions derived from the ACRONYM findings. It is indicative rather than exhaustive and is intended to support, not replace, the analytical recommendations outlined above.

Table 1. Illustrative policy actions to advance cooperation on asylum and migration

Policy focus	Illustrative policy action	Level	Timeframe
Narrative and moral framing	Integrate narrative, trust and perception dynamics into the design and assessment of migration and asylum policies	EU	Medium-term
Imagined vs lived migration	Develop differentiated communication approaches for contexts with limited direct experience of migration, where perceptions are shaped primarily by imagined migration	EU / National	Short-term
Category literacy and clarity	Embed clear and consistent distinctions between refugees, asylum seekers and other forms of migration in official communication and public information	National	Short-term
Education and interpretive capacity	Invest in education and training on migration for journalists, educators and	EU / National	Medium-term



	community actors to strengthen interpretive capacity and resilience to disinformation		
Trusted intermediaries	Establish structured dialogue and capacity-building programmes with religious and community actors where they retain social credibility	National / Local	Medium-term
Local engagement and contact	Support local initiatives that foster direct interaction and cooperation between host communities and migrants or refugees	Local	Long-term

Together, these actions illustrate how the conditions identified by ACRONYM can be translated into policy practice across different levels of governance.

VII. Conclusion

Migration has become one of the most polarising issues in European public debate, not only because of its scale, but because of the meanings attached to it. The ACRONYM project set out to examine these meanings and the conditions under which they are formed, circulated and contested. Its central finding is that the success or failure of asylum and migration policies depends as much on moral interpretation and trust as on legal design or operational capacity.

Across Europe, migration is debated through different moral grammars. In some contexts it is understood primarily as a governance challenge, in others as a question of identity, protection or existential threat. These differences are not temporary misunderstandings to be corrected through better information. They are stable features of political and cultural life. Cooperation falters when they are ignored and becomes possible only when they are made legible to one another.

ACRONYM's distinctive contribution lies in showing that religion plays a critical role in this process of interpretation. Far from being marginal, religious frameworks remain powerful lenses through which migration is morally evaluated, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe but also within broader European political debates. Churches and religious leaders do not simply echo political narratives. They interpret them, filter them and, at times, contest them. In doing so, they can either reinforce polarisation or create space for moral reflection that is not easily accessible through technocratic language alone.

The project's findings demonstrate that religious actors are neither automatic allies nor inherent obstacles to cooperation on migration. Priests and faith communities are themselves embedded in national narratives and often experience moral tension between universal ethical



calls and local anxieties. Where they are unsupported or instrumentalised, their potential moderating role diminishes. Where they are engaged through dialogue, education and institutional backing, they can help translate complex policy debates into moral languages that resonate locally and reduce the sense of imposition from above.

This insight has clear political implications. In a European Union where Christian Democratic parties remain a central force, and where references to Christian heritage continue to shape public discourse, ignoring the religious dimension of migration debates is not a neutral choice. It leaves moral interpretation to polarising actors and forfeits an important channel for building legitimacy and trust.

ACRONYM project also shows that migration debates are often driven by symbolic dynamics rather than lived experience. In contexts where direct contact with migrants is limited, perceptions are shaped by imagined migration, amplified through political rhetoric and media narratives. At the same time, moments of crisis have revealed that solidarity is possible, but selective. These dynamics cannot be wished away. They must be acknowledged and managed if cooperation is to endure.

Ultimately, advancing cooperation on asylum and migration requires shifting attention from messaging to interpretive capacity, from persuasion to trust building, and from abstract convergence to context sensitive engagement. Legal and operational reforms remain necessary, but they are insufficient on their own. Without attention to how migration is morally framed and socially interpreted, even well-designed policies risk rejection or distortion.

By foregrounding narratives, moral frameworks and the role of religious actors as interpreters rather than instruments, ACRONYM project offers a complementary approach to migration governance in Europe. One that recognises diversity not as an obstacle to cooperation, but as a condition that must be understood if cooperation is to be politically viable and socially sustainable.



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