Between knowledge and assumptions:
the migrant in the eyes of the policymaker
A comparative analysis of dominant assumptions and knowledge use dynamics in Austrian, Dutch and Italian migration policy

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PACES (Making migration and migration policy decisions amidst societal transformation) is a 40-month research project (2023-2026) that examines decisions to stay and migrate over time and space, researches the politics of knowledge in migration policy and seeks to use its insights to inform future migration policies and governance. PACES is carried out by a consortium of 14 partners in Europe, Africa and the USA.

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Abstract

What are policymakers' assumptions about how migrants take decisions? Do these change across countries or policy issues? And what role does expert knowledge play in reinforcing or reshaping these assumptions? Based on an in-depth analysis of 180 policy documents surrounding key migration reforms in Austria, Italy and the Netherlands since the 2000s, this paper examines dominant assumptions about migrant decision-making across three policy issues: counter-smuggling, asylum reception, and worker attraction. Our analysis shows that while policy documents rarely discuss migrant decision-making explicitly, they are rife with assumptions around migrant behavior. Specifically, they portray "the migrant" as a fundamentally different figure depending on the policy area at stake – ranging from an often simplistic and patronizing understanding of the irregular migrant to the rational yet easily influenceable figure of the essential worker. Such assumptions shape whether and how knowledge is used to underpin policy choices. While knowledge tends to be mostly disregarded in the politicized area of counter-smuggling, knowledge on reception in the region is often used symbolically. In other words, it is discussed but does not ultimately influence policy decisions. Only in policy documents on essential workers did we identify some instances of instrumental knowledge use. Surprisingly, these issue-specific findings hold across Austria, Italy and the Netherlands despite different geographical contexts, migration histories and commitments to evidence-based policymaking. They invite migration scholars, policymakers and experts to pay closer attention to issue-specific dynamics in migration policy and to further theorize the mechanisms through which not only knowledge use but also non-use and even misuse play out in practice.

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Introduction

> *"The Dutch government believes that: […] greater access of refugees to the labor market of a host country has a positive impact on both refugees and host communities and can lead to reduced vulnerability, higher incomes and positive fiscal effects for host communities." (Dutch policy evaluation report of refugee reception program in Syria, 2024)[1]*

> *"It is clear that [the choice to migrate] is conditioned by a cost-benefit ratio, which is the basis of the worker's individual choices. Several indicators [...] are included in the calculation of this choice." (Italian three-year migration policy guideline, 2001)[2]*

> *"Traffickers are merciless exploiters who take people's last possessions under false pretenses and then often abandon them completely unprotected and disoriented."* (Report by the Austria Interior Affairs Commission on higher penalties for smugglers, 2015)[3]

Assumptions about refugees, migrant workers and human smugglers are crucial in defining policy interventions, since expectations about the behavior of target populations significantly influence policy agendas, the selection of policy tools, and the rationales that legitimize policy choices (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). The statements quoted above, drawn from policy documents in Austria, Italy and the Netherlands, reveal stark differences in the ways in which policymakers frame migrants – sometimes as economic assets, sometimes as hyper-rational actors responding to economic incentives, and at other times as passive, uninformed victims of smugglers' exploitation. These narratives about migration are the basis for the development and legitimization of migration policies (Boswell, Geddes & Scholten, 2011). In a world where migration is among the most instrumentalized and polarizing political discussions, the goal of this paper is to provide a nuanced analysis of assumptions behind migration policy and the role of knowledge in reinforcing or reshaping them.

Specifically, this paper explores assumptions around migrant behavior among policymakers in Austria, Italy, and the Netherlands in three selected policy areas: policies aimed at countering smuggling of irregular migrants, at fostering reception of refugees in regions of origin, and at attracting essential workers for the local economy. Based on the analysis of 180 policy documents – ranging from legislative documents to policy evaluations – we examine the dominant images of "the migrant" and the assumptions underpinning rationales for policy changes, as well as how they relate to existing knowledge on migrant behavior and migration policy effects.

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[1] Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (2024). *Between Prospects and Precarity: An evaluation of Dutch assistance to refugee reception in Syria region (2016-2021)*.

[2] Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali (2001). *Secondo Documento Programmatico*, p.77.

[3] Nationalrat (2015). *993 der Beilagen zu den Stenographischen Protokollen des Nationalrates XXV.GP, Bericht des Ausschusses für innere Angelegenheiten über den Antrag 1202/A(E) der Abgeordneten Ing. Waltraud Dietrich, Kolleginnen und Kollegen betreffend „Höheres Strafausmaß für Schlepper."*

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Our analysis confirms earlier studies showing that expert knowledge about migration is often disregarded entirely or used symbolically to legitimize pre-defined decisions or to avoid controversial decisions (among others, see Baldwin-Edwards, Blitz & Crawley, 2019; Natter & Welfens, 2024; Boswell, 2009). However, we also find that dynamics of knowledge (non-)use are issue-specific, as they vary depending on levels of politicization and institutional responsibilities, with more substantial knowledge use in the area of essential worker policies compared to counter-smuggling and reception in the region policies, where knowledge is at best used symbolically and at worst misused.

These issue-specific dynamics also inform vastly different images of "the migrant" across the documents analyzed. Overall, documents underpinning migration policy choices rarely discussed why and how the proposed measure is meant to shape or affect migrant behavior. At times, "the migrant" was even absent as a figure altogether, as other actors – employers, smugglers, NGOs, local economies – were considered the relevant agents to be influenced. Nonetheless, when policy documents engaged with the figure of the migrant, these tended to be strikingly different across policy issues: While irregular migrants were portrayed as irrational and uninformed, at the mercy of smugglers, and refugees as vulnerable victims devoid of agency, essential worker were painted often as hyper-rational agents, taking decisions on the basis of cost-benefit calculations and therefore prone to be influenced through small-scale policy adjustments.

While we embarked on this research with the expectation to find differences across countries due to their varying commitment to evidence-based policy making and different roles in historical and current migration systems, interestingly, the issue-specific dynamics we identified hold across the three countries. This indicates the existence of shared narratives in policymakers' assumptions on either of the three categories – "the irregular migrant", "the refugee" or "the essential worker".

The next section reviews the literature on evidence-based policymaking, power-knowledge dynamics, and migration policy selectivity and outlines how our issue-specific analysis contributes to those debates. While existing research often discusses migration policy in its entirety or tends to focus only on one specific area of migration policy (e.g. refugees or workers), this paper highlights the importance of disaggregating migration policy and taking serious variations in knowledge-policy dynamics depending on the issue at stake. We then sketch the main characteristics of our double-comparative research design, introducing our three policy issues – counter-smuggling, asylum reception in the region and essential worker attraction – as well as our three case studies – Austria, Italy, and the Netherlands. Next, we outline how we selected policy changes and policy documents, and how we coded and analyzed the data. In the core of the paper, we first present the most dominant assumptions across policy issues and countries and then analyze the (non-)use of knowledge and the figure of "the migrant" in the respective policy areas. In doing so, we evidence the issue-specific nature of knowledge-policy dynamics, i.e. that they differ across migration policy issues depending on their level of politicization and institutional configurations, and examine some of the mechanisms through which knowledge is used,

disregarded or even misused. We conclude the paper with a reflection on the benefits and pitfalls of politicization in migration policy.

Evidence and power-knowledge dynamics in migration policy

Evidence-based (or evidence-informed) policymaking has become a buzzword in the world of policymaking since the 1990s and 2000s (Cairney, 2016; Capano & Malandrino, 2022; Christensen, 2021; Hoppe, 2005; Head, 2016) – also in the area of migration. Nonetheless, the diagnosis of a sustained, if not deepening, knowledge-policy gap around migration remains (Cornelius et al., 2004; Ruhs et al., 2019). To advance the discussion on knowledge use in migration policy, this paper starts from two observations: First, knowledge is not an objective truth waiting to be picked up by policymakers, as its use is always entangled in power relations (Carmel & Kan, 2018; Foucault, 1980). It is therefore naïve to think that providing more expert knowledge or communicating it better to policymaking will suffice to close the knowledge-policy gap. Second, however, the reverse claim – that knowledge does not matter at all in policy design – is equally shortsighted, given the continued investments in and references to expert knowledge by policymakers.

Instead, this paper suggests that to foster the meaningful use of knowledge in policymaking first requires a better understanding of the various roles that knowledge plays in the policymaking process. To do so, it critically examines and compares policymakers' assumptions on how migrants behave, the justification narratives underpinning policy measures across different migration policy issues and how they relate to expert knowledge. Assumptions are people's expectations about how the world works and allow people to navigate uncertain and complex environments. While they are often 'sticky', they can be updated over time as a result of new experiences and knowledge acquired. Justification narratives are "knowledge claims about the causes, dynamics and impacts of migration […] setting out beliefs about policy problems and appropriate interventions" (Boswell et al., 2011, p. 1). Such narratives bring together "the assumptions needed for decision making in the face of what is genuinely uncertain and complex" (Roe, 1994, p. 51) into a coherent story and act as filters for selectively using expert knowledge.

In analyzing these assumptions and justification narratives, we approach migration policymaking as both a social and political process. A social process, because although policymakers' individual preferences might play a role when formulating a legal text or enacting a particular regulation, the formation of preferences and policy priorities is strongly shaped by organizational cultures, inter-institutional relations and collective political beliefs (Bonjour, 2011; Heyman, 1995; Wakisaka, 2022). A political process, because policy decisions need to be legitimized both internally - within the decision-making institution and towards competing political actors – as well as externally, towards

economic actors and, in a democracy, towards the electorate (Boswell et al., 2021; Natter, 2023). Importantly, these institutional preferences and legitimization dynamics are not static but can change over time, as policymakers need to adapt to social change or integrate new realities, experiences or knowledge into their worldviews.

To advance insights into where, when, what and how knowledge is (not) used in migration policy decision-making, we draw on public administration, organizational sociology and institutionalist political science that have studied knowledge utilization dynamics since the 1990s (Christensen, 2021; Hoppe, 1999; Shulock, 1999; Capano & Malandrino, 2022). Collectively, this scholarship has advanced a typology around the (non-)use of expert knowledge in (migration) policy, introducing a broad distinction between (1) instrumental use, (2) symbolic use and (3) non-use of knowledge (Boswell, 2009; Knorr, 1977; Shulock, 1999; Radaelli, 1995). First of all, knowledge can be used instrumentally to improve the effectiveness of policies in achieving their declared goals. Here, knowledge can have a problem-solving function when it is mobilized for technical or substantive guidance of policy choices (Sabatier, 1978). However, knowledge can also take on an 'enlightenment function' when it incrementally (re)shapes the assumptions of policymakers (Weiss, 1977).

However, the literature has shown that more often than not, knowledge is used symbolically, as ammunition in political or organizational power games (Baldwin-Edwards, Blitz & Crawley, 2019; Natter & Welfens, 2024; Scholten, & Verbeek, 2014; Shulock, 1999; Stielike, 2022; Capano & Malandrino, 2022). The work of Christina Boswell (2008, 2009) has been particularly influential here, as she demonstrates how expert knowledge is not valued for its content, but used by policymakers as "a way of signalling the authority, validity or legitimacy of certain policy decisions" (Boswell, 2009, p. 61; Scheel & Ustek-Spilda, 2019). In highly contested and politicised policy areas, knowledge can be used selectively to substantiate pre-existing policy preferences, while contradicting perspectives are ignored (Natter, 2024). Moreover, when institutions derive their legitimacy from narratives rather than from the outcomes of their policies, knowledge can be used selectively to increase the legitimacy and credibility an actor, as the mere reference to expert knowledge helps to sustain the image of policymakers as relevant authority.

Lastly, expert knowledge can be not used in policymaking. This can be due to challenges in accessing knowledge, because of scientific jargon, lacking links between experts and policymakers or lacking organizational capacity of institutions to engage with available knowledge. But expert knowledge might also be actively disregarded, because the course of action suggested by the literature does not match the political and ideological agendas of policymakers (Alagna 2023) or because of a general suspicion towards expertise and facts in the light of post-truth politics (Berling & Bueger 2017; McIntyre 2018). Scheel & Ustek-Spilda (2019) speak of "strategic ignorance" to make sense of such active disregard of knowledge – however, the non-use of expert knowledge has otherwise remained rather undertheorized in the literature.

As we will show, all types of knowledge (non-)use are at play in migration policy, given that migration is a societally complex phenomenon with high levels of uncertainty, a politically

contentious issue subject to polarized public debates and different economic interests, as well as a bureaucratically contested policy issue that lies at the intersection of different ministries and levels of governance. However, the question at the heart of this paper when knowledge is used, not used or misused, and how these knowledge use dynamics work out in practice.

The literature on knowledge-policy dynamics just reviewed suggests that two factors are particularly crucial in explaining knowledge use dynamics: the level of politicization of the issue at stake and the nature and functioning of the organization in charge (Boswell, 2009; Scholten et al., 2015; Ruhs et al. 2019). The literature also highlights how certain forms of expert knowledge and evidence are privileged over others, especially in times of "crisis" (Baldwin-Edwards et al., 2018; Caponio et al., 2015; Boersma et al., 2022; Pettrachin and Hadj Abdou, 2024). In this context, it is surprising that many studies either take 'migration' as a single issue or focus on one particular area of migration policy such as labor migration or irregular migration. This disregards the fact that a country's migration regime is typically a "'mixed bags of measures, containing multiple laws or decrees" that "because they are subject to different arenas of political bargaining, […] are bound to display internal incoherencies 'by design'" (de Haas et al., 2018, pp. 325-326).

Indeed, although immigration is a highly politicised issue overall, certain categories of immigrants such as asylum seekers and irregular migrants are subject to fierce political debate, while others such as high-skilled workers or students remain largely invisible in public debate (Petracchin & Hadj Abdou, 2024; Czaika et al., 2021, Schultz, Lutz, & Simon, 2020; Natter, Czaika, & de Haas, 2020). Furthermore, interest structures and organizational responsibilities differ vastly depending on the migrant group or migration issue at stake (de Haas et al., 2018; Natter et al., 2020). For example, migration and development programs are generally under the responsibility of Ministries of Foreign Affairs, while work permits for highly-skilled migrants are generally a joint competence of Ministries of Interior and Labor and Social Affairs, engaging very different actors, assumptions, inter-institutional relations and thus also – we would argue – policy-knowledge dynamics. This calls for more disaggregated and comparative analysis of knowledge-policy dynamics across migrant groups and policy issues.

To advance insights into issue-specific knowledge use dynamics, this paper therefore offers a comparative analysis of justification narratives in three different migration policy areas, as well as of policymakers' assumptions and images about migrant behavior that underpin them. Ultimately, we hope that this analysis can offer new insights not only on the mechanisms of knowledge use, but also of non-use and misuse, and serve as an entry point for policymakers, academics and migrants to better navigate dominant power/knowledge systems around migration.

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A double-comparative research design

Case selection: Three countries, three policy issues

This paper analyses assumptions of migration policymakers and the role of knowledge therein across Austria, Italy, and the Netherlands – three countries that vary in their immigration histories, current position in the European migration system, as well as tradition of evidence-based policymaking.

Italy is a relatively "recent" immigration country, with large-scale labor, refuge and family immigration from Eastern Europe, South-East Asia and North and sub-Saharan Africa since the 1980s (Colucci, 2018). The Netherlands is a strong economy in North-Western Europe attracting workers from all over the world, with a tradition of guest-worker immigration systems from Turkey and North Africa since the 1950s, as well as important post-colonial immigration from Indonesia and Suriname (Zorlu & Hartog, 2001). Austria, which is situated in Central Europe, presents some of both countries' characteristics. Like the Netherlands, Austria has a long-standing tradition of guest-worker immigration, in this case from Turkey and former Yugoslavia. Yet, like Italy, Austria is a space of transit for refugees crossing Europe to reach countries further north in the EU (Düvell, 2012).

Austria, Italy, and the Netherlands are interesting cases to study knowledge-policy dynamics, as they vary in their broader institutional cultures of knowledge use. The Netherlands presents the strongest formal commitment to evidence-based policy: The country has a formal definition of evidence-based policy (OECD, 2020), participates in the EU-project "Building capacity for evidence-informed policymaking", and has a formal guide to "knowledge-driven policy making". On migration specifically, the Ministries of Justice and Foreign Affairs have been organizing annual conferences that bring together civil servants and researchers working on migration for over a decade, and there is a permanent Advisory Council on Migration that advises the Dutch government and parliament over migration legislation (see Entzinger & Scholten, 2013; Hoppe, 2014; van Nispen & Scholten, 2017). This approach and formal commitment to evidence-based policy leads to the production of numerous evaluation and monitoring reports on migration. On the other end of the spectrum, Italy has no formal definition of, nor commitment to evidence-based policy (OECD, 2020). While knowledge production was central to migration policy in the 1980s and 1990s, subsequent policy reforms diminished instrumental reliance on research, as the ideological gap between Italian policymakers and academics has increased (D'Odorico & Gilardoni, 2023; Zincone, 2006). Falling in between the two is Austria, which does have a formal definition of evidence-based policy (OECD, 2020) but tools such as impact assessments (Wirkungsfolgenabschätzung (WFA)) have a largely budgetary focus (Parlament Österreich, 2023). In the field of migration, an Expert Integration Council has been set up in 2010 to accompany and advise on integration questions, while a separate ad-hoc Migration Council was tasked to develop a migration strategy between 2014-2016. Borkert (2015) describes the relationship between knowledge and policy in Austria as

shaped by expert councils and ad-hoc advisory boards, as scientific bodies have lost authority and have been replaced by "proto-professionalization" (p. 148).

Alongside this variation in country contexts, our research design sought to analytically exploit the entire spectrum of migration policy. Indeed, there is no such thing as "a country's migration policy" given the highly differentiated and sometimes-contradictory rules for specific migrant groups (Schultz, Lutz, & Simon, 2020; Natter, Czaika, & de Haas, 2020). To gain nuanced, varied insights into policy-knowledge dynamics on migration, we decided to focus on three policy issues – counter-smuggling, refugee reception in the region and essential worker attraction – that vary in terms of levels of politicization and type of institutions involved.

Policies aimed at deterring irregular migration and combating migrant smuggling, either through information campaigns discouraging migrants from departing or by imposing penalties and sanctions on smugglers, constitute by far the most politicized of the three policy issues, connected to issues of national security and sovereignty (Baldwin-Edwards et al., 2018; Pettrachin & Hadj Abdou, 2024). Indeed, the media and political discourses often tend to focus on (and scapegoat) irregular migrants and smuggling (for instance for Italy check Orrù, 2018). Asylum seekers are also often a highly politicized group, portrayed both as a victim as well as a burden on public welfare, and in the case of the Netherlands and Austria, they are the second group to be politicized after immigrants in general (Rosenberger & Ruedin, 2017). At the other end of the spectrum, policies seeking to attract or retain foreign workers essential for the economy – both for shortage occupations and the knowledge economy – tend to be less politically divisive, although in the Netherlands high-skilled migration has recently become salient in political debates.

In terms of ministerial responsibilities, the three policy issues also offer insights into varying institutional settings: While the leading role on overall migration policy as well as the area of counter-smuggling lies within the Ministries of Interior or Justice[4] across all countries, the Ministries of Labor[5] play a key role for policies on migrant workers' employment and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs[6] are centrally involved in policies regarding refugee reception outside of Europe, as well as in some contexts for migrant information campaigns. Other relevant actors contributing to policy development across countries include for instance national development cooperation agencies or the national police. Each of these actors brings their own institutional cultures and worldviews with them, which shape how they view migration as an issue and the kind of knowledge and solutions they are engaging with (Jacobsen, 1996; Natter, 2018; Fernández-Rodríguez and Célleri, 2024).

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[4] Bundesministerium für Inneres in Austria, Ministero dell'Interno in Italy, Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid in the Netherlands.
[5] Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Wirtschaft in Austria, Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali in Italy, Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid in the Netherlands.
[6] Bundesministerium Europäische und internationale Angelegenheiten in Austria, Ministero degli Affari Esteri in Italy, Ministero degli Affari Esteri in the Netherlands.

Data collection and analysis

In order to identify and analyze the assumptions on migrant behavior and policy effects that dominate policy discussions, and how they engage with evolving expert knowledge, we first systematically tracked policy changes in Austria, Italy and the Netherlands across all three areas since the early 2000s. Based on the DEMIG POLICY database (DEMIG, 2015) as well as a review of country-specific and thematic reports by the European Migration Network (EMN), we identified major policy changes and reforms around counter-smuggling, refugee reception in the region and essential worker attraction. To ensure comprehensiveness yet feasibility, we selected three to five major moments of change per policy issue and country (see table 1). The table provides an overview of the most important policy developments – our goal here was not to directly compare policy developments across the three countries, but rather to establish a solid ground to investigate knowledge use dynamics across policy issues and over time in each of the countries. It is, however, worth noting that main policy changes across the three areas were initiated around year 2015, at the time of the so-called "refugee crisis".

Table 1: Select policy changes and relevant institutions for Austria, Italy and the Netherlands

	Essential Workers Target Groups: shortage occupation and knowledge workers Policy tools: quotas; specific work permits; point systems	**Counter Smuggling** Target Groups: irregular migrants and smugglers Policy tools: information campaigns; sanctions	**Refugee Reception** Target Group: refugees and asylum seekers Policy tools: reception projects in third countries; resettlement
Austria			
Relevant Institutions	Österreichisches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung; Bundesministerium Arbeit, Soziales, Gesundheit und Konsumentenschutz	Bundesrat; Bundesministerium für Inneres; Nationalrat	Bundesministerium für Inneres; Bundesministerium Europäische und internationale Angelegenheiten; Austrian Development Agency
Policy changes	**2002**: Key Worker policy established "one-stop-shop" linking employment and immigration for essential workers, allowing certain exemptions from quotas. **2011**: Rot-Weiß-Rot Card introduced, enabling skilled workers to enter through a points-based system emphasizing professional background and language skills.	**2005:** Fremdenpolizeigesetz increased penalties for smugglers, emphasizing the human rights abuses associated with smuggling. **2015**: Revision of the Fremdenpolizeigesetz raised penalties further, tying counter-smuggling measures to the 2015 migration crisis. **2016**: Afghan information campaign discouraged migration with targeted	**2006–2009:** Initial focus on education and development through three-year programs; minimal emphasis on migration. **2013–2018**: HAP resettlement programs for Syrian refugees introduced but terminated due to lack of international cooperation. **2022–2024**: Stronger migration-security link

	2022: Reforms eased language requirements and differentiated criteria for essential and knowledge workers to increase attractiveness for migrants.	advertisements and controversial (fake) messages. **2022:** "Myths about Migration" campaign aimed to debunk smuggling narratives using social media and digital platforms.	emerged in Austria's regional reception policies.
Italy			
Relevant Institutions	Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali; Ministero dell'Interno	Ministero dell'Interno	Ministero degli Affari Esteri; Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo (AICS); Ministero dell'Interno
Policy changes	**1998**: Turco-Napolitano Law introduced quotas for sector-specific migration, setting foundation for labor migration policies. **2002**: Bossi-Fini Law restricted labor pathways, tying residency to employment and increasing irregularity risks. **2008–2010**: Pre-training and recruitment programs initiated in source countries to address sector-specific labor shortages. **2012**: Simplification measures extended the period for job-seeking post-unemployment and introduced targeted worker retention strategies. **2022**: Expanded quotas and introduced three-year planning to address critical shortages, especially post-COVID19.	**1990s**: Martelli Law introduced criminal penalties for irregular migration, laying foundation for securitized approaches. **2008-2010**: Decreti Sicurezza emphasized smuggling penalties and criminalised irregular stay; border control linked to anti-smuggling initiatives (Libya). **2015**: Awareness campaigns such as "Aware Migrants" targeted countries of origin, warning of dangers linked to smugglers. **2018**: NGO-targeted sanctions under the Salvini decrees increased scrutiny of search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean. Information campaign "CinemArena". **2023**: Decreto Cutro expanded penalties and linked enforcement to cooperation agreements with transit countries (Libya, Tunisia, Albania).	**1990s**: Bilateral agreements (e.g., Albania and Libya) for migration containment and control, influenced by large-scale arrivals and early EU integration efforts. **2015**: Humanitarian corridors introduced to create safe, legal routes amidst the Mediterranean crisis, driven by collaboration with civil society and EU mandates. **2017**: Renewed agreements with Libya and Niger; Fondo Africa established to enhance border control and regional reception. **2022**: "Piano Mattei" linked migration management with development, signaling deeper integration of economic aid and migration governance.
Netherlands			
Relevant Institutions	Staatssecretaris Justitie en Veiligheid; Minister van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid	Minister van Veiligheid en Justitie; Minister van Buitenlandse Zaken;	Ministers van Buitenlandse Zaken, voor Vreemdelingenzaken en Integratie, en voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking
Policy changes	**2004**: Kennismigrantenregeling (Skilled Worker Regulation) streamlined high-skilled	**2000s**: Initial awareness campaigns funded by the government; penalties for smuggling tied to revisions of the Aliens Act.	**2000s**: Migration-development link theorized, emphasizing how aid could reduce migration.

migration processes with minimal bureaucracy. **2009**: Orientation Year offered a one-year residence permit for highly educated migrants to find employment or start businesses. **2013**: Wet Modern Migratiebeleid (Modern Migration Policy) strengthened the sponsor system to simplify employer-driven recruitment. **2020s**: Discussions about attracting low-skilled workers emerged, but concrete policies remain focused on knowledge migration.	**2016**: Maximum sentences for smuggling raised, including harsh penalties for organized crime and activities leading to fatalities. **2017**: Reports highlighted gaps in information campaign effectiveness, prompting refinements of messaging strategies. **2023**: Center for Evaluation and Development (C4ED) review led to expanded campaigns targeting migrants in Afghanistan, Iraq, and West Africa.	**2005**: Announcement of introduction of the "integrability" criteria for resettled refugees. **2015**: Crisis response focused on emergency humanitarian aid, with narratives hardening against irregular migrants. **2020s**: Capacity-building programs targeting transit regions for socio-economic integration.

For those select policy changes, we collected policy documents that provided insights into the rationale, discussions around and considerations underpinning them. Documents include legislative proposals, parliamentary commission reports, parliamentary questions, government letters to parliament, but also government strategy papers, ministerial reports and policy evaluations. Our goal in selecting relevant policy documents was to stay as close as possible to policy-makers' internal discussions and rationales. While the literature on migration policy highlights the fact that explicitly mentioned policy objectives might differ from underlying, hidden political intentions (Castles, 2004; de Haas et al., 2018), Pécoud (2023, p. 10) rightly argues that "even when communication is used mainly as propaganda, it always entails the development of a rationale – that is to say of a corpus of arguments and worldviews that are designed to convince the audience." It is in this vein that this paper analyzed the 180 policy documents (see table 2). While some documents contain information about multiple policy issues, they are counted in the policy area most relevant to the content.

Table 2: Policy documents analyzed

Country	All areas	Counter-smuggling	Reception in the region	Essential workers	**Total**
Austria	2	20	17	19	58
Italy	5	18	21	17	61
The Netherlands	2	17	21	21	61
Total					**180**

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Our goal was to identify the main assumptions on migrant behavior and policy effects present in those documents in order to understand changes over time, as well as differences across policy areas and countries. To do so, based on an extensive review of academic research on the three policy issues (Ike & van Assem, 2024) as well as a preliminary analysis of a sub-sample of documents, we developed a list of potential assumptions that could be present in policy documents. This resulted in a codebook capturing 36 potential assumptions (see Annex 1): eleven for the counter-smuggling area (e.g. 'migrants lack information on risks', 'fear messaging dissuades migration' or 'smugglers are transnational, centralized criminal networks'), fifteen for the reception in the region area (e.g. 'funding socio-economic integration in the region reduces forced migration', 'regional states are willing to host refugees' or 'resettlement reduces onward refugee movement'), and ten for the essential workers area (e.g. 'the content of immigration policies matters for migrants' decision-making' or 'essential workers integrate more easily'). In addition, we had several 'other' codes to capture, for instance, unexpected assumptions or explicit instances of knowledge use and policy learning. For the purpose of this analysis, policy learning is understood as policy makers actively taking lessons from previous policy choices, from evaluations and reports or from similar policies in other countries, including the commitment to future evaluations of policy (Moyson, Scholten & Weible 2017). To avoid confirmation bias, we not only tracked instances in which the assumptions were confirmed, but also instances in which these assumptions were disconfirmed, i.e. where policy documents showed awareness of evidence countering these assumptions.

All 180 policy documents were coded in Atlas.ti following the four-eye principle to ensure consistency in coding among the team. Each document was coded by one team member, second-coded by another team member, and then checked again by the first, allowing for an alignment of our understanding of the codes. Frequent discussions enabled ongoing refinement of the codebook (see Annex 1). Ultimately, 2304 quotations were coded across the 180 documents. To facilitate identification of patterns and trends, we translated the qualitative analysis performed in Atlas.ti into a dataset, showing the occurrence of assumptions and disconfirmed assumptions over time across the three countries and three policy areas. This dataset provides the foundation for the empirical analysis in this paper. Our double-comparative design allowed us to systematically compare across countries as well as policy issues, but given the striking similarities across countries, we decided to focus the paper on the differences between the policy issues, to which we turn now.

Analysis: issue-specific knowledge use and the differential dehumanization of the "migrant"

Despite different geographical contexts, migration histories and commitments to evidence-based policymaking, assumptions and knowledge use dynamics were surprisingly similar in Austria, Italy and the Netherlands. First of all, across all three countries, documents

underpinning migration policy choices rarely discussed migrant decision-making processes explicitly. There seemed to be little engagement with why and how the proposed measure is meant to shape or affect migrant behavior. At times, "the migrant" was even absent as a figure altogether, as other actors – employers, smugglers, NGOs, local economies – were seen as the agents in the situation. Nonetheless, when policy documents engaged with the figure of the migrant, these tended to be rife with assumptions. Specifically, they portrayed "the migrant" as a fundamentally different figure depending on the policy issue at stake – ranging from often simplistic and patronizing understandings of the irregular migrant to the rational yet easily influenceable figure of the essential worker. Yet, across all policy areas and national contexts, migrants were generally dehumanized – albeit in different ways. As we show in this section, such assumptions around migrant behavior shape how knowledge is used to underpin policy choices and lead to issue-specific knowledge use dynamics: while policies concerning essential workers tend to integrate scientific knowledge on migrant behavior, at least to some extent, allowing for a more complex and (overly) rational portrayal of these migrants, knowledge is either used symbolically or ignored altogether in documents underpinning counter-smuggling or refugee reception policies.

Identifying sticky assumptions

To begin understanding the role knowledge plays in policy decisions, we first provide an overview of the most dominant and recurrent assumptions in policy documents over time and across the countries. In the counter-smuggling policy area, we analyzed documents outlining both punitive approaches such as increasing sanctions for migrant smuggling, as well as educational approaches such as the rolling-out of information campaigns targeting potential irregular migrants. Indeed, all three countries have introduced and then successively increased penalties for both migrants and smugglers over the years – Austria in 2005 and 2015, the Netherlands in 2000 and 2016, Italy in 2008, 2018 and 2023. Information campaigns targeting potential irregular migrants especially across the Middle East and Africa have complemented these measures, starting in the Netherlands in the early 2000s and being rolled out more and more after 2015, in Italy through the 'Aware Migrants' or 'CinemArena' campaigns in 2015 and 2018, and in Austria through a large-scale campaign in Afghanistan in 2016 and the online campaign 'Myths about Migration' since 2022.

In the documents surrounding these policy developments, three major assumptions stand out across the countries and years. First and foremost, policymakers consider smugglers – not migrants – to be the main agents in this policy field and portray them as part of extensive, international criminal networks. For instance, the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security writes in 2023: "*Smugglers often operate in international, criminal partnerships. These well-organized and calculating criminal networks make a lot of money from the illegal entry and*

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transit of migrants into the European Union".[7] This assumption is omnipresent throughout the years and across the countries, despite the fact that scholarship has evidenced the localized, socially embedded and ad hoc nature of most smuggling structures (for instance, see Campana, 2020; Fallone, 2021; Van Liempt & Sersli, 2012). The second, related assumption that is persistent in this area is that increased border controls are effective to reduce smuggling, despite strong scientific evidence of the counter-productive effects of sanctions and securitization (Alpes & Sørensen, 2015; de Haas, 2013; Fallone, 2021; Massey, Durand & Pren, 2016). A third dominant assumption was that migrants are unaware of the dangers associated with irregular migration and smuggling and that – had they been better informed – they would have decided against taking the risk. These assumptions are all reflected in the following response to an Austrian parliamentary question: *"The aim [of the information campaign] is for the Afghan population to inform themselves and not believe the smugglers who are only interested in the refugees' money - and risk their lives to do so."*[8] However, research has shown that migrants are usually well-aware of the dangers and risks of irregular migration through smugglers, but still decide to do so because the alternative is worse (Alpes & Sørensen, 2015; Carling & Hernandez Carretero, 2012; Heller, 2014; Nieuwenhuys & Pécoud, 2007; Van Bemmel, 2020).

In the area of refugee policy, we analyzed two policy tools that seek to shape the conditions under which refugees stay or move on after their first flight, namely reception in the region programs and resettlement. The idea of "reception in the region" has been a core policy tool for the Dutch government since the early 2000s.[9] While the focus of project funding and capacity building has long been on the migration-development nexus, since 2015 there is increased overlap between refugee reception in the region and counter-smuggling policies. In Austria and Italy, the focus on reception in the region is more recent: While Italy has a history of diplomatic migration cooperation with countries in North Africa and South-East Europe since the 1990s, reception in the region has only taken center-stage with the 2017 Africa Fund and the subsequent agreements with Libya, Tunisia and Albania aimed at containment of migrants, including refugees, involving development and cooperation projects with countries of origin. In Austria, refugees in the region have only been sparsely discussed in the three-yearly programs Austrian Development Agency (ADA), until the 2022-2024 plan, where security objectives for the first time emerge in relation to migration. In contrast to reception in the region, which has become a central policy tool across all three countries in recent years, engagement in resettlement programs remains timid and selective. In the Netherlands, resettlement programs have been implemented since the 1970s, but in 2005 the minister of Justice announced that the "integrability" of refugees would be introduced as a new criterion for inviting refugees. In Austria, the UNHCR-led resettlement program (HAP) was rolled out between 2013 and 2018 but discontinued due

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[7] Ministry of Justice and Security (2023). *Explanatory Memorandum for Increasing Smuggling Penalties.*
[8] Bundesrat (2016). *8469/JXXV.GP - Anfrage (elektr. übermittelte Version)(answered in: Bundesministerium für Inneres (2016), 7957/AB vom 18.04.2016 zu 8469/J (XXV.GP)).*
[9] Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (2003). *Kabinetsstandpunt inzake de bescherming van asielzoekers en vluchtelingen in de regio (19637-739).*

to perceived lack of international solidarity. In Italy, in addition to the national resettlement program (Programma Nazionale Reinsediamento), there are noteworthy but ad hoc civil society efforts such as the humanitarian corridors started in 2015 by religious civil society actors.

In the policy documents around resettlement and reception in the region, assumptions surround the topic of international relations rather than migrants and migrant decision making. Across policy documents, the "region" is portrayed as a place to settle to which migrants or refugees can contribute to as an (economic) resource if well managed – an expectation that does not seem to travel to policy discussions around refugee reception in Europe. Assumed cultural connections between the region and refugees' origin countries are perceived to aid this process. Throughout the policy documents, not only are the refugees' individual aspirations generally overlooked; also the interests and priorities of countries in the region are not discussed in detail. While challenges regarding refugee reception are acknowledged, states in the region are generally assumed to be willing to host refugees and migrants, an assumption that clashes with insights from the migration diplomacy literature showing that states in the region pursue different, sometimes contradictory interests and thus often remain ambivalent towards hosting refugees (Betts & Milner, 2007; Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019). Together, assumptions about migrants and third countries foster the idea that development in regions of origin can reduce onward migrant. The focus on development as a tool is reflected in the following quote from Italy: "*The stimulus towards the economic and social development of the beneficiary countries contributes to improving the living conditions of the populations and its activities are, therefore, apt to produce over time a reduction in migratory pressure.*"[10] However, the impact of regional development on outward or onward migration is generally shown to be weak (Clemens & Postel, 2018; Nyberg–Sørensen et al., 2002), or even counter-productive (De Haas, 2007; Gerschutz-Bell, 2022). In addition, development aid is geared towards influencing migrants based on socio-economic decisions, while refugee movement is a response to conflict and violence (Dennison et al., 2019).

In the policy area of essential workers, the three countries adopt different approaches towards filling labor market needs: The Netherlands has exclusively focused on attracting highly skilled knowledge migrants, for instance by granting work-search permits to foreign university graduates since 2009 or simplifying migration processes for knowledge migrants in 2004 and again 2013. Although recent developments in public and political debate demonstrate increasing awareness of the need for other types of essential workers for the Dutch labor market, no policies have been taken in that direction. In contrast, Italy has since 1998 focused largely on attracting essential workers for specific job shortage sectors, such as care, agriculture or hospitality, through a system of annual entry quotas for foreign workers. This system been revised continuously over the years but has never evolved into an active recruitment plan, leading to a high number of people unable to regularize their legal status. Only in 2022 were quotas significantly increased for the first time in decades.

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[10] Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali (2001). *Secondo Documento Programmatico*, p. 49

In parallel, Italy has sought to address labor shortages through setting up recruitment and training programs in source countries since the late 2000s, increasingly connected to bilateral cooperation on countering irregular migration. Austria has taken an intermediary path in terms of both seeking to attract high-skilled and shortage occupation workers through one common system, namely the points-based Red-White-Red card, which was introduced in 2011 and reformed in 2022.

In the policy documents aiming at attracting essential workers, we identified a persistent focus on the level of efficiency and welcoming appearance of the procedures. The most common assumption here was that essential workers are aware of and pay attention to small-scale adjustments in entry criteria and that the efficiency of procedures is a deciding factor. This quote from a Dutch policy document is one of 182 that exemplifies this assumption: *"Good service and high customer orientation (also in foreign languages) contribute significantly to making the knowledge migrant feel welcome and to the image of hospitality of the Netherlands abroad."*[11] A second assumption is that policy makers in this policy area express (implicit) preference for knowledge migrants over other groups of essential workers including workers in agriculture, healthcare or construction. Indeed, as we will show, the agency and behavior of "essential workers" is taken into account to a larger degree in policy documents compared to "irregular migrants" or "refugees", disregarding that one and the same person could potentially fall in all three categories. This different images of "migrants" and their agency to some extent also shape the knowledge use dynamics discussed next.

Counter-smuggling – dehumanization and knowledge (mis)use

Our analysis shows that counter-smuggling policies are characterized by a general disregard for knowledge or political (mis)use of evidence. Penalties for smuggling and information campaigns were developed in Austria, Italy and the Netherlands without solid evidence-based rationales for how increasing sanctions or access to information would contribute to reducing migrant smuggling. Nor did the documents analyzed discuss scholarly insights such as the local nature of smuggling networks or the counter-productive impact of border control on smuggling (Fallone, 2021; Massey, Durand & Pren, 2016, de Haas, 2013). Yet, there were some differences in the extent to which evidence was explicitly not used or misused. Specifically, we found that in Italy and Austria, knowledge disregard was dominating, as the rationale for or effectiveness of penalties and information campaigns was generally not debated at all and policy evaluations of existing measures were lacking. In contrast, in the Netherlands, symbolic knowledge use was prevalent, as reports and evaluations were produced and discussed, but ultimately not used to inform

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[11] Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid (2015). *Kabinetsreactie SER-advies Arbeidsmigratie (29861-38).*

policy decisions, as in the case of evaluation reports on counter-smuggling sanctions discussed below.

In Austria and Italy, policymakers repeatedly advanced anti-smuggling penalties as effective policy tool based on the idea that smugglers operate in transnational criminal networks that deceive migrants, who are uninformed victims of a system of exploitation. For instance, in Austria a motion seeking to introduce higher penalties and increased border controls for smugglers in 2016 was based on the rationale that "*criminal smugglers who enrich themselves from the misery of others, exploit people seeking protection or put their lives at risk in order to maximize their profits should face severe penalties.*" [12] Similarly, in Italy Law 50/2023 included an increase in penalties based on death or injury as a consequence of crimes related to illegal immigration[13], with no justification of why this sanction should prevent smugglers from operating as usual. In both these cases, knowledge on the social embeddedness of smugglers in local communities (Campana, 2020; Fallone, 2021; Van Liempt & Sersli, 2012) was not discussed, and the policy was based on the (erroneous) assumption that smugglers would constantly inform themselves of legal developments in destination countries and adjust their business strategy to them.

We also identified an instance of evidence misuse in the context of Austrian information campaigns. Information campaigns are based on the idea that migrants have insufficient or wrong information about migration and thus designed to provide them with correct information, which should dissuade them from embarking on irregular migration journeys. In Austria, however, the government employed false information in its information campaign in Afghanistan by referring to a restrictive reform of the family reunification law that was not yet passed at the time of the campaign. In a session of parliamentary questions, the Austrian Minister of Interior admits to having used false information on one of the campaign banners (see vignette box below).[14] This active use of misinformation in the information campaign clashes with the assumption that migrants will trust information campaigns as a reliable source to assess potential lies spread by smugglers.

Questions	Answers
3. Were the laws formulated in the slogans already in force in Austria at the time the campaign was launched? *a. If yes, which of the legal provisions referred to had already entered into force?* *b. If no, which of the legal provisions referred to had not yet entered into force?*	*a. No.* *b. New regulation of family reunification.*

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[12] Nationalrat (2015). *AA-117 XXV.GP - Abänderungsantrag (gescanntes Original).*
[13] Senato della Repubblica (2023). *Conversione in legge del decreto-legge 10 marzo 2023, n. 20, recante disposizioni urgenti in materia di flussi di ingresso legale dei lavoratori stranieri e di prevenzione e contrasto all'immigrazione irregolare.*
[14] Bundesministerium für Inneres (2016). *8469/J XXV.GP - Anfrage (elektr. übermittelte Version).*

Interestingly, knowledge disregard at times co-exists with more nuanced understandings of smuggling and irregular migration – specifically in Italian policy documents. For instance, in a policy document from 1997,[15] the idea to open legal migration channels was proposed by the government as a tool to counter irregular migration, aligning with evidence on the topic (for instance Fallone, 2021). Similar understandings of irregular mobility drivers were included in an attempt to reform migration policy in 2006[16], in a 2011 speech by the Ministry of the Interior[17] after the migration fluxes from Tunisia; and again in 2023[18] after the tragic Cutro shipwreck off Italy's southeastern coast. Despite such evidence-informed acknowledgments of migration drivers and the need for legal pathways, however, within the same policy documents, the dominant 'tough' stance persists and smugglers are described as "mafia structures" and "illegal networks" to be combated through stricter border controls and penalties.

In the Netherlands, this trend of simultaneously acknowledging and ignoring knowledge around counter-smuggling measures is taken to another level. In line with the country's commitment to evidence-based policymaking, the Dutch government produced one in-house and one external policy evaluations related to awareness-raising campaigns.[19] Yet, while these reports are referenced in later policy decisions, the engagement with the substance of the evaluations remains largely selective and symbolic in order to underpin pre-determined policy priorities. For instance, an evaluation report (Schans & Optekamp, 2016) often referred to by policymakers and ministers demonstrates that information campaigns are ineffective in achieving the desired results. In particular, it highlights the "*difficult[y] to deliver credible messages, as states that produce the campaigns have different stakes from the non-citizens they are addressing.*" (ib. P. 23) In a letter to Parliament the Minister of Justice acknowledges the problems and shortcomings evidenced in the report, but then precisely uses this report to justify a further expansion of information campaigns: "*The cabinet takes note of the findings of this report. The researchers argue that many campaigns are based on incorrect assumptions. This provides guidance for shaping future information campaigns. The cabinet believes that it is necessary to inform potential migrants from safe countries that they cannot claim asylum in the Netherlands […]. The Cabinet shares the researchers' opinion that it is useful to provide potential migrants with reliable information about the situation on their journey and at the destination*".[20] Policy documents

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[15] Camera dei Deputati (1997). *Resoconto stenografico della I Commissione permanente (Affari costituzionali, della Presidenza del Consiglio e Interni) in Sede Referente, 29 May 1997, in relazione al disegno di legge Disciplina dell'immigrazione e norme sulla condizione dello straniero (3240).*

[16] Camera dei Deputati (2006). *Disposizioni in materia di contrasto al favoreggiamento dell'immigrazione clandestina e modifiche al codice di procedura penale,* 26 October.

[17] Camera dei Deputati (2011). *Resoconto stenografico dell'audizione del ministro dell'Interno, Roberto Maroni, sui recenti sviluppi della situazione nel Mediterraneo*, 2 March.

[18] Camera dei Deputati (2023). *Resoconto stenografico della Seduta n. 95 di martedì 2 maggio 2023.*

[19] Schans, D. & Optekamp, C. (2016). *Raising awareness, changing behavior? Combatting irregular migration through information campaigns.* Den Haag: WODC.; Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (2023). *Evaluation of Awareness Raising Campaigns for (Potential) Migrants.*

[20] Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid (2017). *Beleidsreactie op het WODC-rapport over informatiecampagnes gericht op (potentiële) migranten in herkomst- en transitlanden (30573-136).*

thus seem to take up evidence from research, while at the same time reinforcing the previous policy approach.

Next to such symbolic knowledge use, also in the Netherlands we identified instances of outright disregard and rejection of engaging with knowledge. For instance, in 2016, in the midst of the so-called 'migration crisis' at the EU's external borders, the Dutch government raised the maximum imprisonment sentences for human smuggling.[21] In 2023, the government proposed to raise maximum sentences again. In both cases, the highest administrative law body in the Netherlands, the Raad van State, provided a legal advice to the government, demanding a more elaborate motivation for the policy reform, particularly inviting the government to provide more evidence that higher sentences would have the desired deterrence effect on smugglers.[22] Back in 2016, the government had promised that an evaluation would be carried out after five years in order to assess the alleged "deterrence effect" of higher sentences.[23] However, this evaluation was never carried out due to a lack of a zero-measurement against which the current effects could be assessed.[24] In 2023, the impossibility of conducting the promised evaluation was used by the government to advocate for another increase of maximum sentences: "*Based on the information obtained from the evaluation and because no baseline measurement was carried out at the time of the implementation of the previous increase in the statutory maximum penalties for human smuggling, it is not possible to concretely assess the effectiveness of the previous penalty enhancement. The above does not change the fact that, in particular, the proposed amendment to increase the maximum penalty for the main offense from six to eight years of imprisonment is desirable and necessary.*"[25] The correspondence between the Raad van State and the government clearly demonstrates the performative reference to knowledge, as the promise of an evaluation sustains the illusion of "evidence-based policymaking", while in practice, knowledge is disregarded as the government did not follow up on the request of the Raad van State to provide additional evidence for the proposed change.

Across all three countries, these described non-use, misuse and symbolic use of knowledge make way for a simplistic, dehumanized image of "the migrant" in the counter-smuggling area. The focus on 'the smuggler' in the policy documents removes agency from migrants, portraying them as passive victims or irrational agents. The multifaceted insights by

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[21] The following changes were implemented and entered into force on July 1, 2016: 1) the maximum sentence for the basic offence of human smuggling was raised from 4 to 6 years; 2) in the case of smuggling in the performance of one's duties or profession, imprisonment raised from 6 to 8 years; 3) in the case of professional activities or activities in an organized context, sentences raised from 8 to 10 years; 4) if smuggling activities result in death, sentences raised from 15 to 18 years.

[22] Ministerie van Veiligheid en Justitie (2015). *Wijziging van Wetboek van Strafrecht in verband met de verhoging van de strafmaxima voor mensensmokkel (34345-4);* Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid (2023). *Wijziging van het Wetboek van Strafrecht en het Wetboek van Strafrecht BES in verband met de verhoging van de wettelijke strafmaxima van mensensmokkel en de uitbreiding van de toepasselijkheid van de strafwet op mensensmokkel begaan buiten Nederland (36414-4).*

[23] Ministerie van Veiligheid en Justitie (2016). *Wijziging van het Wetboek van Strafrecht in verband met de verhoging van de strafmaxima voor mensensmokkel (34345-8).*

[24] Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid (2023). *Memorie van toelichting verhoging strafmaxima mensensmokkel.*

[25] Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid (2023). *Memorie van toelichting verhoging strafmaxima mensensmokkel.*

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migration scholars that "smuggling is a reaction to border controls, not the cause of migration" (De Haas 2013) is largely ignored.[26] When migrants are discussed in policy documents, mostly in the context of information campaigns, they tend to be infantilized or patronized. For instance, referring to information campaigns, an Italian ex-Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs stated in 2020 that *"Young Africans need to be taught to love their homeland [...] to rebuild an identity and an attachment to one's own country, making emigration a choice and not an obligation or a necessity that cannot be avoided".*[27] Similarly, the fact that information campaigns often consist only of one-sentence slogans and that their impact is evaluated based on the number of clicks (for online campaigns) or the number of people passing by a billboard or attending a particular event (for offline campaigns), is indicative of policymakers' assumption that migrants can be easily convinced and influenced (on the fallacious assumptions in migration campaigns, see Schans & Optekamp, 2016; McAdam, 2023 and Carling & Hernandez Carretero, 2012). Needless to say that this simplistic and infantilizing view of migrant decision-making in policy documents is at odds with the complex individual and community-decision making that often precedes (irregular) migration projects.

Reception in the region – victimhood and symbolic knowledge use

In contrast to the assumption of highly simplistic decision-making by irregular migrants – who are seen as deciding against their interests due to lack of information and can be easily persuaded through information campaigns – refugees often tend to be deprived of agency altogether in the policy documents we analyzed. Such invisibilisation of refugees and their drivers is even more nuanced than in the counter-smuggling area, as documents relating to reception in the region tend to disregard "the refugee" completely.[28] Rather, they are portrayed as victims of macro-political circumstances with little agency in deciding when and where to go, thus requiring management efforts to organize this migration. This focus on institutional and management efforts is reflected in the Dutch approach: *"The root causes of irregular migration will be tackled, for example through migration partnerships, while longer-term facilities will be created for reception of refugees and displaced people in*

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[26] We found one explicit exception to this in our policy documents, namely in Italy in the 2001 Guidelines on migration policy (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Poliche Sociali (2001). *Secondo Documento Programmatico*). Here it reads: "Should legal channels of entry to Italy be closed or restricted, the pressure of irregular entries would be exacerbated, with all the obvious consequences in terms of increased opportunities for human traffickers and criminal organizations." (p. 2). However, this acknowledgement was not follow through in policy, as the 2002 Bossi-Fini law further restricted legal channels and increased border controls.

[27] Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione e lo Sviluppo (2020). *Realtà e rappresentazione sociale dei flussi migratori verso l'Europa nell'Africa sub-sahariana.*

[28] We found one exception to this, namely Italian documents related to resettled refugees (Sistema di Protezione Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati (2016). *Rapporto Annuale Sprar)*, where we find for instance a quote that considers refugees' vulnerabilities from a psychological point of view: "From the perspective of beneficiaries, resettlement programs can raise expectations that are often ambitious or unrealistic, which, combined with frustration and possible trauma from previous experiences, can prove to be a source of anxiety and tension that can ultimately lead refugees to ill-adapt to the proposed prospects of reception."

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the region".[29] The retainment of migrants in the region is combined with a discussion of the protection of vulnerable migrants, legitimizing regional reception programs, as this quote from Austria shows: *"The transcontinental flow of refugees and the associated dangers to people's lives should be contained; the protection of particularly vulnerable groups, such as women and children, and the implementation of protective measures on site in the regions of origin should be given special priority."*[30]

At the same time, once refugees are (re)settled – be it in the 'region' or in Europe – they are meant to immediately be pro-active social and economic agents that contribute as a resource to local economies and risk to become a burden otherwise. The fear of resettled refugees not integrating, and thereby becoming a burden to their host country, is demonstrated in a Dutch document: *"Some [resettlement] cases were rejected on the grounds of non-integrability. After all, the invited refugees must have some prospect of an independent existence in the Netherlands in due course."*[31] Indeed, concerns of burden sharing and integration capacity often overshadow refugees' individual needs in discussions around resettlement. In both the Netherlands and Austria, policy documents highlight the goal of resettlement programs to protect the most vulnerable. Yet, the vulnerability of refugees is not always the main selection criteria: In 2004, the Dutch government introduced an *"ability to integrate"* criterion for resettled refugees,[32] and also Austria based the selection of refugees on *"their willingness to integrate into a free society"*.[33] An exception to this are the Italian policy documents, which do engage with the resettled refugee as an individual.[34] This difference between Austria and the Netherlands on the one hand, and Italy on the other can partly be explained by the environment in which resettlement takes places. In contrast to Austria and the Netherlands, the Italian resettlement programs are NGO-led, leading to the incorporation of multiple actors and perspectives, and different knowledge dynamics.

Such image of the "refugee" as both victim deprived of agency and agent required to integrate and contribute to the new host society also informs how knowledge on refugee decision-making is or is not taken on board in policy development. Across the three countries, symbolic knowledge use dominated, whereby reports on policy effects were produced and referred to but then disregarded or misinterpreted, or whereby the importance of evaluation was stressed, but eventually not followed through. Indeed,

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[29] Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (2022). *Do What We Do best: A strategy for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation.*
[30] The Migration Council for Austria (2018). *Understanding Migration – Managing Migration.*
[31] Ministerie van Vreemdelingenzaken en Integratie (2006). *Brief minister met jaarlijkse informatie over benutting quotum en nadere invulling van selectiemisses, onder meer over enkele wijzigingen in het beleid (19637/29237-1071).*
[32] Ministerie van Vreemdelingenzaken en Integratie (2004). *Brief minister over hervestiging uitgenodigde vluchtelingen (19637-841).*
[33] The Migration Council for Austria (2018). *Understanding Migration – Managing Migration.*
[34] Sistema di Protezione Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati (2016). *Rapporto Annuale Sprar.*

evaluation reports[35] or annual or multi-year guidelines[36] abound in this policy area. When used effectively, these documents could serve as a way of policy learning or engaging knowledge in policy making. However, the content of these documents is often disregarded, as in the following example from Italy. In 2022, the Italian Agency for Cooperation and Development (AICS) published a note about the impact of development on migration flows in Ethiopia.[37] The document acknowledges that "*numerous analyses point out that better levels of development do not stop migration flows; on the contrary, they may further fuel them as they increase the resources that households can use to support the migration process.*" (ib., page 34) Despite these clear findings and the uptake of scientific knowledge around the migration-development nexus in the report (de Haas 2007, Clemens and Postel 2018), the same year the government proposed the 'Piano Mattei' plan to increase Italian development projects in Africa. A year later, the government produced a document called 'Guidelines on the Migration-Development Nexus', the first of the AICS guidelines devoted totally to development. This document explicitly links development efforts to migration, highlighting how development contributes to increased conditions in the countries of origin and to the decrease of migration, therefore aligning with the logic of the Piano Mattei and not with the scholarly knowledge on the migration-development nexus.

In addition, policy documents frequently include a commitment to use experience and expertise or conduct policy evaluations in the future, without following through on this promise. In one of the multi-year strategy documents, for instance, the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs mentions this importance of policy learning by stating that *"in implementing these goals [of aid for regions of origin], Austria takes particular account of its experience and substantive strengths",*[38] but the rest of the report does not explain what this experience entails or how it can contribute to achieving the set goals.

Lastly, in contrast to counter-smuggling policies that usually lie in the sole competence of Ministries of Interior or Justice, reception in the region policies were usually in the hands of various agencies and institutions, leading to a loss of knowledge between these actors, as knowledge that is present in documents from some actors is not translated to others. For example, in 2016 the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) presented a list of questions that should be asked before engaging in development programs regarding migrants and

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[35] Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum (2008). *Uitgenodigde Vluchtelingen: Beleid en de maatschappelijke positie in nationaal en internationaal perspectief.*
[36] Bundesministerium für europäische und internationale Angelegenheiten (2018). *Entwicklung. Jetzt. Dreijahresprogramm der Österreichischen Entwicklungspolitik 2016-2018*, is an example of three-year reports on development strategy
[37] Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (2022). *Rapporto di Valutazione, Valutazione dell'iniziativa di emergenza in favore delle popolazioni vulnerabili, dei rifugiati, degli sfollati e dei migranti per contrastare le cause della migrazione irregolare.*
[38] Bundesministerium Europäische und internationale Angelegenheiten (2022). *Bessere Lebensperspektiven weltweit mehr Sicherheit in Österreich Dreijahresprogramm des österreichischen Entwicklungspolitik 2022 bis 2024.*

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refugees in order to take into account the complexities of such projects.[39] Furthermore, the
ADA contributes to reception in the region with multiple developmental programs, ranging
from socio-economic development to education programs for refugee and migrant
children.[40] However, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not engage with these points and
did not mention the ADA programs in its strategy reports.[41] Therefore, in contrast to the
other policy issues, knowledge use dynamics around reception in the region and
resettlement are also shaped by the structure of divided responsibility across different
government actors. On the one hand, the incorporation of multiple actors can broaden
perspectives, as exemplified by the Italian NGO-driven resettlement policy. On the other
hand, the incorporation of multiple actors can lead to non-use of knowledge, as it remains
present in only one part of government.

Essential workers – (hyper)rationality and instrumental knowledge use

Due to the lower politicization and different kind of institutions involved, we expected
different knowledge-policy dynamics at play regarding essential worker policies. And
indeed, our analysis shows that the policymaking process is much more technocratic than
in the other two migration policy areas, at least in its rhetoric. References to monitoring and
evaluation and the production of data and statistics were common across the three
countries. However, as we show, the technocratic vocabulary of the policy documents did
not always lead to evidence-informed policy solutions.

In most cases, knowledge use was also here rather symbolic. The mere production of and
references to expert knowledge was used to lend credibility to predetermined policy
choices, but in fact did not meaningfully shape the actual policy content. Especially in
Austria, reference to evaluation and monitoring reports were frequent and the rationales for
policy changes included statistical data, thereby creating a sense of "data-driven" and
"evidence-based" policy making. However, our analysis suggests that actual policy learning
remains limited. Most references to knowledge were either vague, future-oriented or mere
references to past developments without future consequences. The following example at
first seems to indicate policy learning, as the previous quota is reflected upon. "F*or this
reason, the granting of this residence title should not be subject to a quota, as such a
restriction would contradict the objective of this title."[42]* However, there is no indication that

[39] Austrian Development Agency (2016). *Steps for implementing migration aspects in ADA programs and projects.*
[40] Austrian Development Agency (2003). *Sonderprogramm Westsahara_Flüchtlingslager der Polisario, Bildung und Infrastruktur*; Austrian Development Agency (2005). *Schulbildung für Flüchtlings- und Migrantenkinder;* Austrian Development Agency (2007). *Stärkung von Flüchtlingen und IDs zur Sicherung der Lebensgrundlage.*
[41] Bundesministerium für auswärtige Angelegenheiten (2006). *Dreijahresprogramm der Österreichischen Entwicklungspolitik 2006 bis 2008, Fortschreibung 2006.*
[42] Nationalrat (2011). *251/ME XXIV.GP -Ministerialentwurf – Gesetzestext.*

migrants were discouraged by the existence of this quota nor that removing the quota would encourage migrants to come to Austria.

Across all documents analyses, we did however also identify two clear instances of instrumental knowledge use (in the Netherlands and Italy), whereby the reference to evidence was followed by a revised policy on the ground. Policymakers engaged with the existing knowledge in a meaningful way and used insights provided to revise and improve their policies.

The first case is that of the Dutch "Regeling Hoogopgeleiden" of 2009 that was designed to attract foreign top talent to bolster the Dutch knowledge economy.[43] Highly educated migrants – defined as those who have graduated at one of the top 150 universities in the world – were offered a one-year residence permit to look for a job or to start an innovative business in the Netherlands. The objective was to attract at least 500 talented migrants within two years. However, a 2011 evaluation showed that only 392 migrants entered through this regulation after two years.[44] In reaction to this self-commissioned evaluation, the Minister of Justice suggested a revision of the policy, broadening the regulation to include the top 200 universities in the world.[45] Two years later, new evaluations and monitoring reports concluded that the regulation remained largely ineffective in attracting talented knowledge migrants.[46] As a consequence, the Minister of Justice, in a letter to Parliament,[47] announced two new reforms of the Regeling Hoogopgeleiden to enhance its transparency and effectivity in attracting more migrants.

The second case of instrumental knowledge concerns Italy's (multi-)annual Fluxes decrees, which exemplifies the consistent production and use of knowledge for solving procedural issues and at the same time the dependency on political imperatives for opening legal channels. The Fluxes decree was introduced by the 1998 Turco-Napolitano law to establish quotas to regulate foreign workers' legal entries in Italy. Since then, the Italian Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Work and Social Affairs have been committed to use internally gathered data about essential workers, as well as knowledge produced by foundations and research centers analyzing the needs of the economic market. For instance, the three-yearly guidelines from 1998 included the idea "*to establish(ing) a permanent body that, in addition to ensuring coordination of the various administrations, will have the specific task of monitoring the implementation of the law.*"[48] Such a body was instituted in the "Commissione per le politiche di integrazione degli immigrati", and evaluations of the Turco-Napolitano law were included in each of the subsequent three-yearly guideline documents (Documento Programmatico, 1998, 2002, 2004). Part of the recommendations

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[43] Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum (2014). *Gezocht: Buitenlands toptalent: Evaluatie van de Regeling Hoogopgeleiden (Cahier 2014-4)*.
[44] Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst (2011). *Evaluatie Regeling Hoogopgeleiden: De kenniseconomie versterkt?*
[45] Ministerie van Immigratie, Integratie en Asiel (2012). *Evaluatie van de regeling Hoogopgeleiden zoals uitgevoerd door het IND Informatie- en Analysecentrum (INDIAC) (30573-95)*.
[46] Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst (2013). *Monitor Kennismigranten: Kwantitatieve analyse*.
[47] Ministerie van Veiligheid en Justitie (2014).*Vereenvoudiging toelatingsregelingen voor kennis en talent (29861-36)*.
[48] Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali (1998). *Primo Documento Programmatico*.

were considered in the elaboration of new laws to eliminate particularly complicated bureaucratic obstacles to foreigners' work and residency permits, such as the 2002 Bossi-Fini law and the 2003 Biagi Law,[49] which was based on research published two years earlier by an influential economist.[50]

However, until 2023, foreign worker quotas themselves remained limited, despite repeated expert evidence that Italy's labor market was in need of more migrant labor and talents, as explained by the yearly reports by Italian research centers like Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS (Immigrazione Dossier Stastistico), Fondazione Leone Moressa, and Iniziative e Studi sulla Multietnicità (ISMU). Political considerations to limit the number of foreigners were more important that economic considerations to fill market needs. Slightly ironically, then, the biggest expansion of migrant labor quotas in two decades was enacted in 2023 by Giorgia Meloni's far-right government, elected on an ant-immigration platform (Ambrosini, 2025). Under consistent pressure from employers' organizations, and in line with expert knowledge on market demand, Meloni's government almost doubled the quota for foreign workers, from 75.705 in 2022 to 136.000 in 2023. In this case, knowledge was not used to inform the direction of policy change, but to establish how policy is to be implemented. As suggested by Boswell (2009), the instrumental use of existing knowledge – reports, statistics, data produced by the Ministry of Social Affairs and by independent research centers – happened because there was a need to adjust policy outcomes due to external pressures, in this case the interests of employers' corporations.

The combination of instrumental and symbolic uses of knowledge, exemplified with the Dutch and Italian cases, show that the figure of the migrant worker is slightly more nuanced compared to other areas, yet is still founded on simplified imaginaries. Across the three countries, continuous policy revisions are based on the idea of the "essential worker" as a highly rational and optimizing decision-maker. For example, in a letter by the state secretary of justice and security regarding the attractiveness of the Netherlands for knowledge migrants, the author writes: "*The aim of the study is to gain insight into what immigration policy can do to make The Netherlands more attractive to knowledge migrants and, more specifically, what the IND and other involved parties can do to optimize the services to knowledge migrants.*"[51]

Differently from other areas, the interests, drivers and movements of essential workers are analyzed meticulously with the aim of attracting workforce or talents to the country. This is especially true for high-skilled workers, where policies are meant to accompany and retain foreigners, contrary to other migrant groups. For instance, with the opening of the "Working Corridors" legal pathways, the Italian government states that it will implement policies capable of "*enabling the foreign person to better orient his or her choices in the new context*

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[49] Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali (2001). *Libro Bianco sul Mercato del Lavoro in Italia.*
[50] Decreto Legislativo 10 settembre 2003, n. 276.
[51] Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid (2019). *Beleidsreactie op het WODC onderzoek 'Aantrekkelijkheid van Nederland voor kennismigranten' (30573-171).*

of life and to foster his or her social inclusion."[52] Given the relatively low level of politicization and controversy in this area, policymakers can afford to adopt a more nuanced imaginary of migrants and to design their policies based on existing evidence to a larger extent. This is in sharp contrast to the counter-smuggling and reception in the region areas, where most policies are designed to abandon the migrant both with its explicit containment aims, as well as substantively by ignoring the agency of migrants within the policy.

Although the depiction of essential workers is slightly more nuanced than that of irregular migrants or refugees, essential workers are also dehumanized, as they tend to be reduced to mere "contributors" to the national economy, thereby ignoring the human elements of their life aspirations. For instance, in the 2011 justification for the reform of the Red White Red card, it reads that "*immigration to Austria can be expected to be more targeted and better geared to Austria's needs*",[53] and the Dutch State Secretary of Justice highlights that "*the admission of international knowledge workers serves a major Dutch interest.*"[54]

In practice, this (simplistic) imaginary is often beneficial to essential workers compared to other migrant categories, as policies are designed to accommodate the wishes and desires of essential workers as much as possible. However, it is important to note that the privileged position of knowledge migrants is contingent on their economic contribution, quite literally in the case of the "sponsor system" by which one's residence status is directly tied to one's employment status. The benefits of such privileged treatment and of the cost-benefit rationale that underpins it, therefore, only apply as long as the migrant is of economic value – which is deeply problematic in a policy area that deals first and foremost with people, not commodities, as Swiss writer Max Frisch already captured so well back in 1965: "We asked for workers. We got people instead."

Conclusion

This paper advances our understanding of knowledge (non-)use in the area of migration policy, highlighting the need to move beyond migration policy as a homogeneous field. As de Haas et. al (2018, p.316) note, "because they are subject to different arenas of political bargaining, migration policies are bound to display internal incoherencies 'by design', depending on the specific migrant categories and policy issues at stake." This also has repercussions on knowledge-policy dynamics.

Indeed, we identified different knowledge use dynamics across the three policy areas, shaping images about "the migrant" targeted. The non-use and symbolic use of knowledge, which we have especially seen in counter smuggling and reception in the region policies, correlates with a negligence or a simplistic, dehumanized perception of 'the migrant'. The

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[52] Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, Comunità di Sant'Egidio (2024). *Protocollo di Intesa per la Realizzazione del Progetto "Apertura di Corridoi Lavorativi" (art. 3).*
[53] Nationalrat (2011). *1078 der Beilage XXIV.GP - Regierungsvorlage – Materialien.*
[54] Ministry of Justice (2008). *Brief staatssecretaris over blauwdruk modern migratiebeleid (30573-10).*

slightly more nuanced imaginary of 'the migrant' and engagement with the migrant as a person in the 'essential workers' policy area relates with slightly more instrumental knowledge use. Even so, the essential worker is also dehumanized and reduced to economic contributions. If considered as an agent at all, for example in information campaigns or on governments' websites, the message towards "the migrant" greatly differs between the three groups, losing the notion that a single person could potentially fall in all three categories.

Our findings confirm insights from the literature that the level of politicization and institutional division of labor of an issue crucially shape the extent to which policymakers draw on expert knowledge (Boswell, 2008; Boswell, 2009; Scholten et al., 2015; Ruhs et al. 2019). Indeed, whereas asylum seekers and irregular migrants are usually a numerically small group of migrants in all three countries we analyzed compared to family or labor migrants, much of the political debate revolves around these categories. Given this high level of politicization, politicians have to show that they are acting on migration, regardless of whether the policies are effective in reaching their self-declared goals. Policies in these areas are themselves rather symbolic and performative in nature. Accordingly, it is no surprise that policies are slightly more evidence-based in the least politicized area.

Our analysis also strengthens analysis around institution-specific knowledge use dynamics: While the Ministries of Interior and of Foreign Affairs – responsible for counter-smuggling and for refugee reception policies in all three countries – gain legitimacy from their discourses and narratives rather than from the outcomes of their policies, the Ministry for Work and Social Affairs, less prominent in public discussions around migration, draws its legitimacy more from the impact of its policies on social and economic life. This is reflected in differences regarding knowledge use, as the Ministries of Internal and Foreign Affairs tend towards a more symbolic or non-use of knowledge, while the Ministry of Work and Social Affairs showcase more instances of instrumental use or at least engagement with expert knowledge.

While we clearly identified differences across the three migration policy issues, it was striking to see that Austria, Italy and the Netherlands displayed overall similar knowledge use dynamics, despite their vastly different national evaluation cultures, migration histories and role in Europe's migration system. The analysis showed that knowledge is used – if at all – to legitimize pre-defined positions in migration policymaking, regardless of the countries' commitment to evidence-based policymaking. The most substantial difference we found was in the production of policy-learning documentation like evaluations, especially in the Netherlands. While these could represent a source of knowledge, policy makers hardly engage with the content of these documents, with some exceptions in the essential worker policy area.

Ultimately, given the empirical prevalence of knowledge non-use in migration policy, our findings highlight call for a better theorization of knowledge non-use as a complement to the fine-grained discussions of instrumental and symbolic use, as well as for systematizing insights into the mechanisms through which symbolic use, instrumental use and non-use or

even misuse work out in practice. These findings and suggestions also raise questions with important political implications: Would knowledge use dynamics improve if migration was moved out of the spotlight? Would depoliticization of migration lead to more fact-based discussions around migration policy? Or is depoliticization a risk in itself, as migration is an inherently political issue that needs political – not technical – responses? Indeed, evidence-based (or evidence-informed) policymaking might run the risk to reduce migration to a matter of 'problem management' whereby democratic struggle is replaced by technocratic 'solutions'. Thus, instead of striving to depoliticize migration, a more promising strategy to bring knowledge back into the migration debate might be to try and re-politicize migration in the context of broader socio-political discussions that take into account the deeper structural inequalities that shape not only migration but also many of the social, economic and political faced by societies around the globe.

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Between knowledge and assumptions: the migrant in the eyes of the policymaker 37
*A comparative analysis of dominant assumptions and knowledge use dynamics in
Austrian, Dutch and Italian migration policy*

Annex 1

Codebook and coding protocol, v.2.3

Coding protocol:

- Structured approach: If possible, code older documents first and move to more recent documents within the same policy area, to increase transversal thinking
- Focus: Code the voice of policymaker – not of other actors – again, when in doubt, explain your thoughts in a comment
- Iterative coding: Each document should be coded in at least two coding rounds, once focusing on detecting assumptions or disconfirmed assumptions, once focusing on main goal/policy learning/mechanisms/other codes
- 4-eye principle:
  - Each document will be coded by two people (within the same document), first by the leader of the case study, then by one of the other team members to ensure consistency in coding and cross-case study insights.
  - The second reader reviews, comments on and suggests codes/quotations.
  - The first coder then reviews the quotes/codes and takes final decisions. In most cases, this will be possible without further discussion, just based on the comments on quotations. Should further discussion be necessary, these points are summarized in the 'coding doubts and decisions' memo and then discussed in a collective meeting.
  - Once the first coder reviewed and cleaned up the document, it is finalized.
- Regular reviews: Every two weeks we have a stocktaking exercise to see which codes need to be added/adjusted/expanded. We discuss specific coding decisions; and keep track of more generic coding doubts or decisions to be made in the 'coding doubts and decisions' memo.

Codebook:

Notes: The letters at the beginning of the code identify the policy issue: 'S' stands for counter-smuggling policies, 'R' for reception in the region policies and 'E' for essential worker policies. In addition, we have a few codes preceded by 'O' to indicate that these codes are not about the core assumptions but either contextual or exploratory. The numbers in the code refer to the number of the assumption in the state of the art report. For example, codes S1.1 and S1.2 are both related to the first assumption on counter-smuggling policies in the state-of-the-art report. There are two versions of each code: When 'D' is added, it means that the assumption is disconfirmed by the quotation. For example: S1.1 or S1.1D.

Counter-smuggling

- S1.1: irregular migrants are irrational actors

Assumption that irregular migrants are irrational actors making decisions against their own interests, as they are not taking into account/acting upon their knowledge about the risks of the journey and hardship of life at the destination. This disregards that high-risk migration is often seen as a meaningful and reasonable step in the lives of people.

- S1.2: migrants lack information on risks
  Assumption that migrants rely on human smugglers and decide to migrate because of the absence of adequate and objective information about the dangers of such migration journeys and potential legal or socio-economic difficulties at the destination.
- S1.3: migrants trust information campaigns
  Assumption that information conveyed via information campaigns is trusted by the target audience, despite it often coming from/being financed through public authorities in destination countries.
- S2.1: fear messaging dissuades migration
  Assumption that providing information about the risks and dangers involved in human smuggling dissuades people and as a result irregular migration would be reduced.
- S2.2: staying put is the risk-averse alternative
  Assumption that the status-quo – staying put, not migrating – is peaceful, nice and comfortable. Staying put is assumed to be the risk-averse option, as opposed to the high-risk decision to migrate irregularly.
- S3.1: migrants' decisions are based on cost/benefit assessment
  Assumption that assessing the risks and benefits of migrating is the main basis for migrants' decision making, compared to more immaterial drivers such as hope, belief or honor.
- S3.2: smugglers are aware of/act upon penalties
  Assumption that smugglers are well informed about the legal framework across Europe with regards to penalties and base their decisions on it.
- S4.1: smugglers are transnational, centralized criminal networks
  Assumption that smugglers are part of large transnational, centralized networks of organised crime instead of characterised by a horizontal structure, ad-hoc linkages and deep embeddedness in local communities.
- S5.1: smugglers are responsible for creating irregular migration
  Assumption that without smugglers, there would be no irregular migration; ignoring that restrictive border policies are fundamentally a driver of smuggling.
- S5.2: border controls are an effective means to tackle irregular migration
  Assumption that as long as you have effective border controls, you won't have irregular migrants, as most irregular migrants in Europe have been smuggled into Europe/crossed the border irregularly; ignoring the phenomenon of overstay.
- S6.1: irregular border crossing is always a crime

Assumption that all irregular border crossings are a criminal offence that people need to be informed about, regardless of whether the person might be a refugee.

Reception in the region

- R1.1: funding socio-economic integration in the region aid reduces forced migration
  Assumption that funding socio-economic measures and thus 'fighting economic root causes' in the region of reception will prevent onward movement of forced migrants. This disregards that onward movement is often not driven by economic motives but also by the search for safety, which cannot be tackled through development aid.
- R1.2: capacity building reduces forced migration
  Assumption that building up capacity of refugee recognition and reception systems in the region will prevent onward movement, i.e. forced migrants to seek refuge elsewhere/beyond the region.
- R2.1: regional reception enhances migrant safety by preventing onward movement
  Assumption that if refugees are provided with a safe space in the region, they will not be in need of seeking protection in Europe anymore and of embarking on dangerous journeys.
- R2.2: regional states are willing to host refugees
  Assumption that countries in the region are capable and willing to keep their borders open to asylum seekers and integrate them (thus not following the European securitization trend in framing migrants as security issue).
- R2.3: regional states will monitor borders
  Assumption that countries in the region are capable and willing to prevent onward movement to Europe through security and border controls (thus following the European securitization trend in framing migrants as security issue).
- R3.1: regional reception facilitates return
  Assumption that reception in the region would facilitate return to countries of origin due to geographical proximity.
- R3.2: regional cultural proximity facilitates regional integration
  Assumption that reception in the region would increase chances of refugee integration due to cultural proximity.
- R4.1: refugees are resource for region
  Assumption that incoming refugees can be a source for development in third countries - geopolitically through attracting humanitarian aid and generate international credibility; and economically by bringing economic assets and human capital.
- R5.1: development initiatives are key to international solidarity in refugee reception
  Assumption that donor countries can redress the current imbalance between available economic resources and protection responsibility through development

initiatives and hereby live up to donor states' international responsibility for and solidarity in refugee protection.

- R5.2: international cooperation on regional reception is smooth
  Assumption that international cooperation on refugee hosting with third countries is smooth, ignoring the complexity of global migration diplomacy, as well as the thorny national sovereignty issues refugee protection raises for third countries.

- R5.3: international cooperation with countries in the region reduces migration pressure
  Assumption that engaging in international cooperation agreements with origin and transit countries is in itself a tool that will allow to successfully manage or reduce asylum and irregular migration

- R6.1: resettlement redresses global imbalance in refugee reception
  Assumption that donor countries can redress the current imbalance in global refugee reception (who hosts how many refugees) through resettlement programmes and hereby live up to donor states' international responsibility for refugee protection.

- R6.2: resettlement reduces onward refugee movement
  Assumption that resettlement would reduce spontaneous asylum applications and thus the number of people that attempt to cross the Mediterranean.

- R6.3: resettled refugees are selected based on vulnerability
  Assumption that selection criteria underpinning resettlement programmes are geared towards protecting the most vulnerable/those most in need (and not based on other criteria such as cultural proximity or integration fitness), hereby redressing the current de-facto principle of the strongest gaining access to asylum.

- R6.4: Providing information on life at the destination facilitates refugee integration
  Assumption that migrant behavior can be steered and future integration problems avoided if refugees are given information on how life looks like at the destination so that they have realistic expectations and can integrate well economically, socially and culturally.

Essential workers

- E1.1: labor migrants are rational actors
  Assumption that (prospective) labor migrants make rational decisions on whether to migrate and where to based on a series of factors/cost-benefit comparisons.

- E1.2: the content of immigration policies matters for migrants' decisionmaking
  Assumption that immigration policies are the main factor in individual migrants' decision-making (instead of other factors such as family connections, curiosity, language etc.) and that thus, migrant behavior can be shaped through policy (such as tax policy, opportunity for family reunification and permanent residency).

- E1.3: efficient and welcoming procedures/information matter for migrants' decisionmaking

Assumption that increasing the efficiency, transparency and ease of admission procedures and information about them makes the country more attractive to essential workers, as it helps them to navigate the system.

- E2.1: Market-driven attraction policies are always effective
Assumption that policies based on neoliberal market logics (both supply/migrant- and demand/employer-driven systems) are effective in attracting essential workers, regardless of other contextual variables such as the integration environment, international attractivity or cultural-linguistic dynamics.

- E2.2: Essential workers want to migrate to the country in question
Assumption that the country in question has to actively select essential workers based on their skills and need in the economy and does not need to actively attract or motivate them to move to the country. This disregards the fact that often it is essential workers who select their destination countries rather than the destination countries their essential workers.

- E3.1: Low integration requirements favor migrant attraction and retention
Assumption that the exemption from integration requirements increases the attraction and retention of essential workers, disregarding that the freedom from integration requirements can also be alienating.

- E3.2: Access to more stable stay rights favor migrant retention
Assumption that access to more stable or extensive residency or labor rights increases the retention of essential workers, disregarding its potential to increase circularity and mobility.

- E4.1: Essential workers integrate more easily
Assumption that essential workers are more desirable because they integrate more easily and smoothly into the host society than other categories of migrants like asylum seekers and irregular migrants, who are subjected to stricter integration requirements.

- E4.2: Essential workers do not need to be proficient in the local language to make valuable contributions
Assumption that it does not matter to what extent essential workers speak German/Dutch/Italian because they either stay in the country only temporarily or do not need German to do their jobs successfully and so language requirements can be softened.

- E5.1: High-skilled migrants are more desirable than other essential workers
Assumption that high-skilled migrants (or knowledge migrants) should be given priority in essential worker policies compared to other groups of essential workers because of their assumed key role in economic development or higher cultural compatibility. This disregards the fact that some crucial sectors of the economy (e.g. agriculture, tourism, construction, health care) rely on wide range of essential worker groups; as well as the fact that people from all over the globe are arriving as high-skilled migrants.

Additional codes

- O1: other assumption on migrant behavior or policy effect
  Captures any other assumptions that you come across. In the comment of the code/quotation, please mention what the assumption is about for easier retrieval later. This will be reviewed and eventually recoded later on.
- O2: assumption on public preferences/concerns
  Captures any assumptions about public preferences/concerns or public opinion on the issue at stake (e.g. about salary dumbing, social cohesion, crime etc). In the comment of the code/quotation, please mention what the assumption is about for easier retrieval later.
- O3: declared aim of policy measure
  Captures the core aim of the proposed or enacted policy measure. The policy might pursue hidden, underlying aims but here we focus on what is explicitly stated.
- O4: mechanism linking policy and effect
  Captures the mechanism that is presented as linking the proposed policy measure to the desired effect (either through a theory of change or a causal link or based on other knowledge about the phenomena discussed).
- O5: policy learning reference
  Captures explicit references to or discussions of previous policies and their effects, indicating learning.