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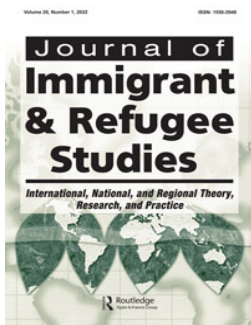
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Theorizing the Life and Death of Moments of Openness toward Refugees in the Global North: The Case of Germany during the 2015–2016 Refugee “Crisis”

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a theoretical framework for the analysis of moments of openness toward refugees in the Global North. Four key types of representations and perceptions of the displaced are identified: deservingness, relatedness, perceived proximity, and connectedness to national identity. These representations and perceptions may enter policy-making through top-down and bottom-up mechanisms. This theoretical framework is applied to Germany's response to the 2015–2016 refugee “crisis.” Findings highlight the fragility of some representational and perceptual registers, and set the stage for a broader research agenda on the emergence, evolution, and decline of moments of openness toward refugees in the Global North.

KEYWORDS

Refugees;
representations;
perceptions;
policy-making;
openness;
Global North;
Germany

Introduction

In the past decades, countries across the Global North have increasingly and significantly reduced access to asylum. These forms of “neo-refoulement” (Hyndman & Mountz, 2008) insulate the Global North from forced displacement they have often contributed to (Arat-Koç, 2020), encourage the use of dangerous routes to asylum (Gibney, 2006), and leave countries in the Global South to respond to the vast majority of the refugee population (UNHCR, 2020). While the existing academic literature aptly describes the negative representations of refugees that feed into these restrictionist regimes (see Chimni, 1998; Gibney, 2003), few scholars investigate the opposite phenomenon: the emergence of moments of openness toward refugees, where their access to protection in the Global North is not only eased, but perceived as *morally mandated*.¹ A better understanding of such phenomena and the roles of representations and perceptions therein is crucial as it may open new insights into how international solidarity may be cultivated.

This paper suggests a theoretical framework for the analysis of moments of openness toward refugees in the Global North. Four key types of representations and perceptions of the displaced are identified in such contexts: i) deservingness; ii) relatedness; iii) perceived proximity; and iv) connectedness to national identity. Two mechanisms capture the roles of these representations and perceptions in policy-making processes: i) the top-down approach conceives elites as using welcoming representations and perceptions in an attempt to legitimize their policy preferences to the wider society; ii) the bottom-up perspective identifies public and media representations and perceptions of refugees as exerting pressure on elites to respond to the plight of the displaced. Declines in openness involve similar dynamics, this time through a return to restrictionism.

This article's second section tests these theoretical insights with Germany's response to the 2015–2016 refugee “crisis.” Germany received about one million asylum seekers within a year and maintained—at least during a significant period of time—a relatively welcoming approach to refugees. This case therefore lends itself to a compelling analysis of moments of openness. In line with theoretical expectations, findings indicate that asylum seekers arriving in Germany were predominantly conceived as deserving of protection by elites, the media, and the public throughout most of the period under study (2011–2016). Welcoming perceptions of relatedness, proximity, and connectedness to national identity were further mobilized by the media and governing elites. The emergence and evolution of the moment of openness reveal both top-down and bottom-up influences. The decline in openness, however, more clearly demonstrates bottom-up effects.

This article is structured as follows. The first section outlines the theoretical framework. The second section discusses the research design, while the third section presents the case study's main findings. The conclusion highlights the main takeaways and sets the stage for a broader research agenda on the emergence, evolution, and decline of moments of openness toward refugees in the Global North.

Theoretical framework

As the politics of restrictionism often entail negative representations and perceptions of the displaced, how can refugees and asylum seekers move beyond them? Building on the existing literature, this section suggests four types of shifts from negative to welcoming constructions of the displaced. It also highlights two mechanisms through which these representations and perceptions influence and enter into policy-making. Lastly, it discusses the similar dynamics involved in the declines of openness.

Deservingness

The first type of shift in representations and perceptions of the displaced moves them from undeserving “migrants” to deserving “refugees.” Holmes and Castañeda (2016, p. 17) define deservingness as a “conditional attribution enabling a moral demarcation [...] between people who are understood as worthy of the international community's physical, economic, social, and health aid and those who are not.” Most crucially, those understood as *forcibly* displaced by political circumstances such as war and violence—“refugees” in the popular meaning of the term—are usually framed as deserving, while those perceived as having made “a free and autonomous *choice* to cross borders”—economic migrants—are generally positioned as undeserving (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016, p. 17; see also Achiume, 2019). Similarly, those waiting to be resettled are generally understood as deserving of protection, while those spontaneously crossing borders—asylum seekers—are often perceived as cheaters and queue jumpers (Hyndman & Giles, 2016).

The displaced thus need to move beyond any appearance of opportunism to be deemed deserving of protection. According to Fassin (2005), it is in the name of the *suffering body* (or the suffering mind) that the individual is legitimized into the polity. Ticktin (2017) further highlights the importance of *innocence* in producing deservingness. While children embody the “archetypal figure of innocence,” women are “more easily understood as victims and as apolitical” (Ticktin, 2017, pp. 580–582). Single men, by contrast, are often represented as rational choice individuals motivated by economic gain, when they are not instead constructed as security threats (Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018; Rettberg & Gajjala, 2016).

Deservingness is therefore achieved once the displaced are fully grounded in a rhetoric of suffering and innocence, for which certain groups and individuals better align. As a result, the displaced become “people to whom there is an ethical duty to support” (Goodman et al., 2017, p. 106).

Relatedness

The hosts' identification with the displaced also varies. Refugees and asylum seekers are commonly dehumanized, notably by using non-human categories or inferior qualities to describe them (Esses et al., 2017). As a result, support for the dehumanized becomes "unnecessary or inappropriate" (Kirkwood, 2017, p. 116). While humanizing processes may promote understandings of refugees as "being within 'our' moral community, as acting in ways that 'we' can understand, and belonging to a common group referred to as 'fellow human beings', thus justifying their support" (Kirkwood, 2017, p. 122), these constructions may not be enough to instill identification with the displaced. As refugees are usually depicted as "generalities of bodies" without names or specific histories for their displacement, "it becomes difficult to trace a connection, a relationship, other than that of a bare, 'mere', common underlying humanity" (Malkki, 1996, p. 388).

In this context, identification with the displaced can be enhanced in two ways. Psychological research highlights the greater ability of human beings to empathize with *individuals* rather than groups, with the effect that iconic photographs of suffering victims often drive more attention to the plight of a group than mass casualties (Slovic et al., 2017). Moreover, common ethnic, sociocultural, or historical features between the hosts and the displaced may lead to greater responsiveness (Gibney, 1999; van Selm, 2001; El-Enany, 2016). According to Gibney, such features—or *relatedness*, as the author puts it—particularly contributed to the outpouring of sympathy of Western audiences toward Kosovar refugees in 1999. As Gibney argues,

Here were forced migrants who looked and dressed like them, who fled by car (even facing traffic jams on their trip to safety) and who, through the use of articulate and well-educated translators, could express their suffering in terms that resonated with Western audiences (1999, p. 30).

A second shift from negative representations and perceptions is therefore achieved once the displaced are resolutely grounded in humanizing narratives, which resonate all the more as they build upon individualized stories and the ethnic and sociocultural attributes of the host group.

Perceived proximity

Another shift involves the hosts' perceived level of geographical proximity to the displaced. Perceived distance often produces ignorance or indifference toward "distant strangers" (de Swaan, 1997, p. 106). Yet, distance can also be central to sympathy—"for when [unfortunates] come together in person to invade the space of those more fortunate than they and with the desire to mix with them, [...] then they no longer appear as unfortunates" (Boltanski, 1999, p. 13).

In this context, the effect of perceived proximity on attitudes is mediated by the deemed deservingness of the group. In their discursive analysis of UK media reports during the 2015 refugee "crisis," Goodman et al. (2017) note that the "geographical marker of the migrant crisis [...] help[ed] to signify the level of threat that the migrants [were] deemed to be bringing" (pp. 111–112). References to a "Mediterranean," "Calais," and "European" migrant crisis indicated increasing levels of threat. However, once the discourse shifted from a "migrant crisis" to a "refugee crisis"—thereby changing the perceived level of deservingness of the group—, a "relative outpouring of sympathy" was observed (Goodman et al., 2017, p. 110). van Selm (2001) similarly highlights the role of perceived proximity in her analysis of the Western response to Kosovar refugees in 1999:

...the popular perception of [Kosovars] as refugees indicated they should and would move on to "better" protection elsewhere. And since they were European, and therefore "close," they should move on to protection in Europe and traditional reception states (p. 259).

A third shift is therefore achieved once deserving refugees are perceived as geographically close to the hosts.² In such cases, perceived proximity can catalyze openness toward refugees.

Connectedness to national identity

The hosts' perceived connections between their national identity and the plight of the displaced also vary. National identities are primarily a social construct, a way to "locate [oneself] in the world with some reference to the mythic dimensions of [one's] nation" (Dauvergne, 2005, p. 49). Such constructs also have political potential. As Waeber (1993, p. 38) argues, "societies where there is resonance for a national appeal [would be ill advised to attempt political mobilization without including] a logic of arguing from the nation: that this is good because it is in the interest of the nation, or the way "we do things," or some other appeal with the nation as a source of motivation."

The effect of national identity on attitudes toward refugees partly depends on how the nation is defined. Citrin et al. (2012) notably find that patriotism is associated with support for immigration and multiculturalism in Canada, but not in the United States—a difference they interpret as resulting from distinct elite rhetoric and policies. The effect of national identity on hosts' responses also depends on the perceived level of deservingness of the displaced. When refugees are perceived as deserving, welcoming them works to "confirm and reify the identity of the nation as good, prosperous, and generous" (Dauvergne, 2005, p. 4). Perceptions of ingroup virtue, however, can backlash against the outgroup if it is construed as sinful (Reicher et al., 2008).

National identity is therefore a double-edged sword which can nourish openness when the understandings, myths, and symbols of the nation are framed toward inclusion and a narrative of deservingness is present.

Representations and perceptions in policy-making processes

The existing literature suggests two pathways for the use and influence of representations and perceptions in policy-making processes (see Figures 1 and 2). Under the top-down approach, governing elites may use representations and perceptions in an attempt to legitimize their policy preferences to the wider society. Elite motivations may stem from individual preferences, ideological affiliations, or changing interests (see Gibney, 2003, pp. 24–26). This approach is generally used to explain the politics of restrictionism (see e.g. Chimni, 1998; Bigo, 2004). For instance, Chimni argues that once refugees ceased to have geopolitical value with the end of the Cold War, "a clear message was sent to the population [...]: that asylum seekers were here for no good reason, that they abused hospitality, and that their numbers were too large" (1998, p. 357). While relatively less discussed, the top-down approach can also be applied to more welcoming responses to refugees. For example, Watson (2009) identifies the Canadian government as "the actor most strongly engaged" in desecuritizing Tamil asylum seekers arriving by boat in 1986, namely by grounding their reception in "Canada's humanitarian traditions" (pp. 59–60).

In contrast, the bottom-up approach highlights the constraints that public and media representations and perceptions of the displaced may exert on policy-makers. According to Gibney, Western governments became increasingly vulnerable to the highly restrictionist attitudes of their constituents with the end of the Cold War. Hence, Gibney argues, "the roots of restrictive asylum policies [...] lie in a perception by elites that the conduct of asylum policy risks exacting political costs for them" (2003, p. 29). While rarely discussed, societal attitudes can also pressure elites toward openness. Mares (2003) notably argues that Australia's participation in the resettlement of Kosovar refugees in 1999 resulted from the "barrage of media criticism that portrayed the government as hard-hearted in the face of human suffering" (p. 344). Similarly, van Selm notes that the public leapt *ahead* of states in their will to protect the Kosovars, thereby driving governments to act "from a public relations perspective" (2014, p. 519). According to van Selm, "the perceptions that policymakers have of public perceptions of the 'refugees' and their treatment are the deciding factor in further 'refugee' protection, even if states in principle have to live up to a range of international protection and human rights commitments" (2001, p. 257).

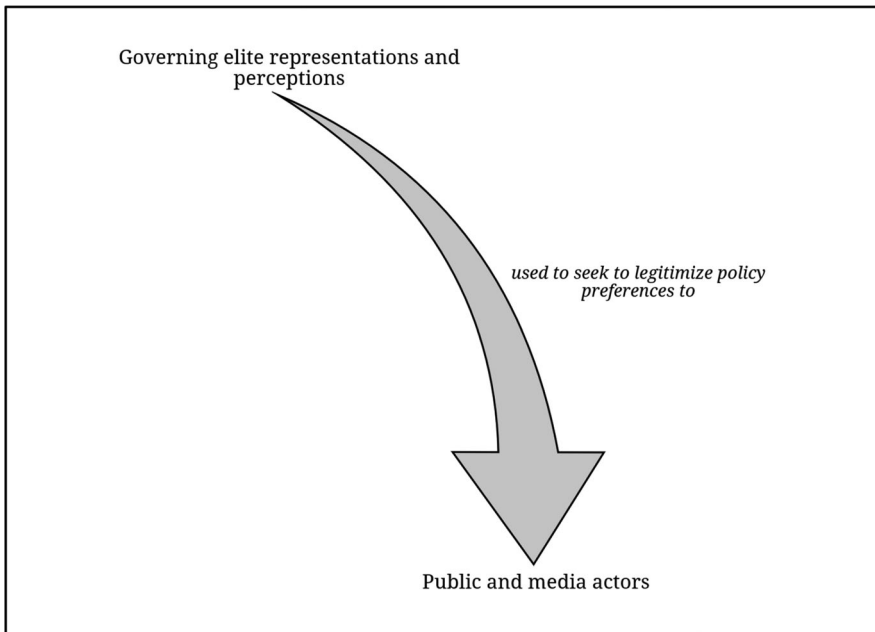


Figure 1. The role of representations and perceptions in policy-making under the top-down approach.

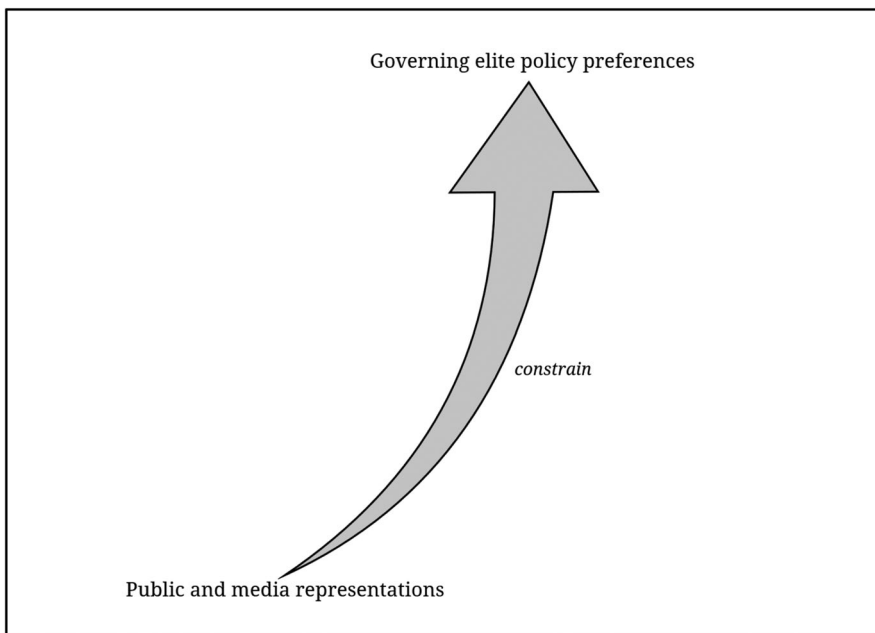


Figure 2. The role of representations and perceptions in policy-making under the bottom-up approach.

Top-down and bottom-up approaches therefore provide analytical lenses through which the salience of representations and perceptions of the displaced in refugee policy-making can be captured. As discussed below, these approaches often overlap in practice.

Explaining declines in openness

As few scholars delve into the emergence of moments of openness, the literature's insights on their decline are equally limited. Several authors point to the hosts' expectation that refugees respond with gratitude to their display of benevolence (see e.g. Boltanski, 1999; Arat-Koç, 2020). Vollmer and Karakayali (2018) highlight how this philanthropic relationship is "highly precarious since it depends entirely on the constant repetition of an asymmetric pattern in which refugees need to act according to the needs of the emotional investment of the providers of help" (p. 129). According to Ticktin (2017), this relationship is bound to fail, as "the innocent sufferer can never be isolated for long enough to keep it uncorrupted by history or context" (p. 584).

Furthermore, some scholars shed light on the state-society dynamics involved in declines of openness. According to Mares (2003), the influence of the Australian media, albeit initially significant in driving the government to resettle Kosovar refugees in 1999, ultimately waned as governing elites remained convinced that Kosovar refugees had to return to their country once the conflict was over. In contrast, Molloy et al. (2017) argue that the Canadian government's leadership in welcoming Indo-Chinese refugees in the late seventies ultimately withered as governing elites concluded that they "could not exceed the 50,000 target without provoking a [public] backlash" (p. 11). These examples suggest that similar top-down and bottom-up mechanisms may influence declines in openness, although more research into these dynamics is required.

Empirical application

Research design

The second part of this paper applies the theoretical framework outlined above to Germany's response to the 2015–2016 refugee "crisis." The next section outlines the main hypotheses of the paper and the data collection and data analysis strategies used to test them.

Hypotheses

In line with the literature, moments of openness are expected to rely on the mobilization of deserving representations of the displaced. While perceptions of relatedness, proximity, and connectedness to national identity can further encourage openness, deservingness is understood as a necessary condition. Indeed, openness is unlikely to be encouraged if the displaced are perceived as unworthy of aid, regardless of the receiving society's welcoming national myths or their sense of identification and perceived proximity with the displaced. Rather, as suggested above, undeservingness often reverses the welcoming potential of these other features. Undeserving "migrants" tend to be dehumanized, rendering them unrelatable (see Kirkwood, 2017; Esses et al., 2017). They become threats to the nation (Louis et al., 2013; Reicher et al., 2008), and all the more so the nearer they get (Goodman et al., 2017; Mares, 2003).

The literature reviewed above essentially suggests two hypotheses for the roles of representations and perceptions in policy-making processes. Under the top-down hypothesis, governing elites should rely on welcoming representations and perceptions of the displaced in an attempt to legitimize their policy preferences to other societal actors. Time order and decision-making processes should indicate that governing elites engaged in openness independently of public and media representations and perceptions of the displaced. Societal representations and perceptions could become more welcoming toward the displaced as a consequence of welcoming elite discourses and policies. Similarly, the top-down hypothesis expects negative representations and perceptions of the displaced to be used by governing elites to justify renewed restrictionism.

Under the bottom-up approach, constituents and/or the media should mobilize welcoming representations and perceptions of the displaced. Time order and decision-making processes should indicate that policy-makers engaged in openness as a result of those pressures. Evidence

that societal representations and perceptions of the displaced *facilitated* policy-making toward openness would partially support the bottom-up hypothesis. The bottom-up hypothesis also expects public and media representations of the displaced to pressure governing elites into renewed restrictionism toward refugees.

Data collection and analysis

This research involved collecting and analyzing data on four sets of indicators: i) elite discourses; ii) media framings; iii) public opinion and mobilization; iv) refugee policy-making processes and arrival numbers.

Governing elite representations and perceptions of the displaced were primarily constituted of the systematic collection of every statement and press release translated in English on the websites of the Federal Chancellor (Bundeskanzlerin) and Federal Government (Bundesregierung) between 2011 and March 31, 2016 which contained the words “refugees,” “asylum” or “migrants.”³ For the Federal Government, results were restricted to those associated with the Ministry of the Interior. After eliminating duplicates, 91 entries were collected for the Chancellery and 32 for the Federal Government. These samples were supplemented with the verbatim of two key speeches pronounced by Chancellor Angela Merkel over the period under study: i) the 2014–2015 New Year’s Eve address; and ii) the August 31, 2015 press conference. In order to capture more spontaneous statements by governing elites as well as contestation among them, English-language media reports were further collected from *Deutsche Welle*.⁴ Results were restricted to reports containing the words “refugees,” “asylum” or “migrants” with the word “Germany” between 2011 and March 31, 2016, and they were screened for entries suggesting reporting on political elites. As a result, 239 media reports were analyzed.

The resulting sample of elite statements was assessed through *thematic analysis*, defined as “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Thematic analysis is distinct from content analysis, as in the former “the importance of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures, but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question” (Vaismoradi et al., 2013, pp. 402–403; see also Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). A theoretical and deductive approach to thematic analysis was undertaken (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86) by assessing how political elites constructed the displaced, particularly in relation to the four types of representations and perceptions discussed above: deservingness, relatedness, perceived proximity, and connectedness to national identity (see [Annex 1](#) for a summary of how these themes were operationalized). Both welcoming and negative variations on those themes were considered. The prevalence of themes was assessed through their number of occurrences as well as the relative resonance of speeches. As Hansen (2006, p. 76) explains, not all statements are equally “read and attended to”—those that are more widely so have a more “central role in defining dominant discourses.”

Media framings of refugees were captured through recent communication studies, which have conducted content and discourse analyses of German media coverage during the period under study and whose findings intersect with the four types of representations and perceptions discussed above (see e.g. Berry et al., 2015; Gross, 2015; Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017; Holzberg et al., 2018; Winter et al., 2018). Differences in coverage across media outlets were also considered. These content and discourse analyses were supplemented with iconographic and iconological studies of popular media images displayed during the refugee “crisis” (see e.g. De-Andrés et al., 2016; Lenette & Cleland, 2016; Lenette & Miskovic, 2018). Subsequent applications of this theoretical framework should use original media content and discourse analyses.

Public constructions of the displaced were primarily assessed through public opinion data. The *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* and *Infratest Dimap* polling firms frequently surveyed German respondents on their policy preferences regarding the refugee situation, including their support

for increased or sustained arrivals (*Infratest Dimap*) and their perception of the country's capacity to cope with "the many refugees" (*Forschungsgruppe Wahlen*). *Infratest Dimap* also periodically surveyed German respondents on the legitimacy of various motives for fleeing. Together, these opinion polls can be used to infer the level of public sympathy toward the displaced, especially when situating the evolution of public opinion with the number of arrivals (Grote, 2018, p. 16). Voting intentions and public mobilization—both in favor and against refugees—were also tracked to draw inferences about public attitudes toward the displaced (see Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach (IfD Allensbach), 2019; Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend (BMFSFJ), 2017; Amnesty International, 2016). These data sources were supplemented with findings from the secondary literature (see notably Czymara & Schmidt-Catran, 2017; Dostal, 2015; Rietig & Müller, 2016). While the evolution of these indicators allows for the drawing of inferences on the deemed deservingness of the displaced across time, the lack of data makes it impossible to precisely track the impact of relatedness, perceived proximity, and connectedness to national identity on public perceptions. This limitation should be addressed in future research by conducting tailored surveys, interviews and focus groups as refugee situations unfold.

Lastly, the evolution of policies, decision-making processes, and arrival numbers was tracked by consulting government publications, official statements, media reports, journalistic investigations, and secondary literature. These indicators were then analyzed through process-tracing, which involved assessing "all the intervening steps in a case" (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 207) in order to identify "which simple principles of the many that may be at work, would have combined to generate the observed sequence of events" (Goldstone 1991, in George & Bennett, 2005, p. 206). The roles of representations and perceptions of the displaced in policy-making processes was considered, along with other potential explanatory factors such as regional politics, the agency of the displaced, and international norms.

Findings

The findings are organized as follows. The first subsection describes the generally welcoming representations and perceptions of the displaced mobilized by governing elites, the media and the public until December 2015. The second subsection assesses the main factors explaining policy-making processes over this period. The last subsection analyzes the decline in openness observed from January 2016 onwards.

Navigating openness (2011—December 2015)

Elite discourses. For most of the period under study, elite representations and perceptions of the displaced remained generally welcoming, although narratives of deservingness did not apply to all asylum seekers. German political elites particularly sought to circumscribe the access and stays of those they considered as economic migrants (see e.g. Deutsche Welle, 2011, 2013a, 2014a, 2015a; Die Bundesregierung (The Federal Government), 2015a, 2015b; Die Bundeskanzlerin (The Federal Chancellor), 2015a). The Balkans were particularly targeted by this rhetoric of undeservingness. In contrast, Syrian nationals were generally elevated as deserving figures for whom resources could be devoted (see e.g. Deutsche Welle, 2013b, 2014b, 2015b; Die Bundeskanzlerin (The Federal Chancellor), 2013; Die Bundesregierung (The Federal Government), 2015c).

The rhetoric of deservingness for war-fleeing refugees was regularly employed by Chancellor Merkel (see e.g. Spiegel, 2014; Die Bundesregierung (The Federal Government), 2015c; Die Bundeskanzlerin (The Federal Chancellor), 2015a, 2015b; Deutsche Welle, 2015b, 2015c). In her August 2015 summer press conference, she notably described the displaced as individuals who often had "to overcome situations or endure fears that would probably just make us collapse" (Die Bundesregierung (The Federal Government), 2015c). In her 2015–2016 New Year's address,

she reasserted that “many of these refugees are literally fleeing death [and] it goes without saying that we will help them” (Die Bundeskanzlerin (The Federal Chancellor), 2015b).

In addition, governing elites often drew upon national identity myths to justify support for refugees (see e.g. Spiegel, 2014; Die Bundeskanzlerin (The Federal Chancellor), 2015c, 2015d; Die Bundesregierung (The Federal Government), 2015c, 2015d, 2015e; Deutsche Welle, 2015c, 2015d, 2015e, 2015f, 2015g, 2015h). This rhetoric was commonly used by Merkel. In her August 2015 address, she depicted Germany as a prosperous and redeemed nation for welcoming refugees, arguing that “our freedom, our rule of law, our economic strength, the order in which we live together—that’s what people dream of, who have come to know persecution, war, arbitrariness in their lives. The world looks up to Germany as a land of hope and opportunity, and that was not always the case” (Die Bundesregierung (The Federal Government), 2015c; Deutsche Welle, 2015d). Merkel also enumerated several challenges the country had overcome in its recent history, including its reunification. She introduced the refugee situation as a new challenge, hence exclaiming that “we have already achieved so much—we can do it!” (Die Bundesregierung (The Federal Government), 2015c, 2015e). “We can do it,” or “*wir schaffen das*,” became Merkel’s famous motto.

While the theme of relatedness is not as frequent across elite statements and discourses, it appears in key discourses pronounced by the Chancellor and President Joachim Gauck over the period under study. For her 2014–2015 New Year’s address, Merkel notably highlighted how “the children of those who have suffered persecution can grow up here free of fear. And that was also a motive of the many people who took the streets in the GDR every Monday [...] for democracy and freedom and against a dictatorship that made children grow up in fear” (Spiegel, 2014). In her speech to the European Parliament in October 2015, she argued that “the reasons why people leave their homelands are all too familiar to us from our own European history. For centuries, our continent was not the destination, but first and foremost the starting point for refugees, displaced persons and migrants” (Die Bundesregierung (The Federal Government), 2015a). In a June 2015 ceremony for victims of displacement, President Gauck similarly connected the plight of contemporary refugees to the memory of German expellees during and after World War II (Deutsche Welle, 2015i). Through these historical reminiscences, Merkel and Gauck mobilized perceptions of relatedness with the displaced to justify their welcome.

Likewise, perceived proximity was drawn upon by governing elites on key occasions during the period under study (see Die Bundesregierung (The Federal Government), 2015a, 2015c; Die Bundeskanzlerin (The Federal Chancellor), 2015a; Deutsche Welle, 2015i, 2015j, 2016a). As the Chancellor argued during her summer press conference, conflicts “take place on our doorstep, and when we do not solve them, [then] we have to solve them by taking in refugees; this truth is manifesting more and more” (Die Bundesregierung (The Federal Government), 2015c). Addressing the European Parliament in October 2015, Merkel similarly argued, “in these past few months in particular, we in Europe have seen how closely connected we are to these global events, directly, whether we like it or not. We can no longer shut ourselves off from what is happening in the world” (Die Bundesregierung (The Federal Government), 2015a). Merkel called for action “to overcome the many crises that are happening on our doorstep,” and insisted on the need “to take greater care of those who are in need today in our neighborhood” (Die Bundesregierung (The Federal Government), 2015a). In August 2015, Ministers Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Sigmar Gabriel wrote an op-ed piece in which they similarly argued that in light of crises “in our neighborhood [...] we Europeans owe it to ourselves and the world to do justice to the great challenge presented by these people seeking help” (Deutsche Welle, 2015j). These welcoming perspectives on perceived proximity were nonetheless contested by the Christian Social Union (CSU)—Merkel’s sister party in Bavaria—which deplored a “suction effect” (Deutsche Welle, 2015k) requiring the implementation of “self-defense” measures at the border (Deutsche Welle, 2015l, 2015m, 2015n).⁵

Media framings. Content and discourse analyses of German media similarly note a generally supportive coverage of the refugee cause for most of the period under study. Berry et al. (2015)

content analysis of German press coverage from June 2014 to April 2015 focuses on three major German newspapers across the political spectrum: *Bild* (populist right), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (centre-left), and *Die Welt* (centre-right). The authors find that the displaced were overwhelmingly described as “refugees” regardless of political leanings: between 70% (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*) and 77% (*Bild*) of all labels indeed referred to this term. Through this language, media outlets generally constructed the displaced as legitimate refugees in need of protection. Vollmer and Karakayali’s (2018) textual and visual analysis of German media coverage between March 2015 and March 2016 similarly describe a largely positive coverage of the refugee cause throughout the year 2015, including from the tabloid and right-wing press. Several newspapers further published articles that highlighted the (redeemed) virtue of the German nation for welcoming refugees (see Blume et al., 2016; Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018; Winter et al., 2018).⁶

Nonetheless, the displaced remained generally decontextualized. The media rarely mentioned names and the personal stories of the displaced, let alone the reasons behind their displacement (Holzberg et al., 2018; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017). The death of Alan Kurdi on September 2, 2015 and the widespread coverage that his images sparked (Vis & Goriunova, 2015) therefore provided a strong individualized narrative. The images depicted a clear figure of innocence: a child who appeared to be asleep (Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018, p. 125). His light skin, Western-like clothes, and intact shoes contributed to creating *relatedness* between him and Western audiences (De-Andrés et al., 2016, p. 32; Lenette & Cleland, 2016, p. 78; El-Enany, 2016). This relatedness was amplified by mentions of his name and background story, which eased a sense of identification with the victim and further dragged “the Syrian exodus out of anonymity” (De-Andrés et al., 2016, p. 35; see also Lenette & Miskovic, 2018). The images also conveyed perceptions of proximity. The photographs were not taken in what appeared as a “foreign environment,” but rather depicted a child at Europe’s doors whose death “could [have been] prevented through political action” (Lenette & Cleland, 2016, p. 79).

Public opinion and mobilization. During most of the period under study, German policy attitudes remained generally welcoming. In September 2014, 51% of respondents agreed that Germany should accommodate “significantly more refugees” from Syria and Iraq (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2014). In December 2014, 67% of respondents either believed the number of refugees admitted by Germany to be just right (39%) or considered the country could take in more refugees (28%) (Infratest Dimap, 2014). A month later, the proportion of respondents supporting current or increased arrivals increased to 73% (Infratest Dimap, 2015a). Such figures suggest a relatively high level of sympathy toward the displaced.

Infratest Dimap surveys are particularly helpful for assessing perceptions of deservingness. In January 2015, 94% of respondents believed it was “right” (as opposed to “wrong”) for Germany to receive war refugees (Infratest Dimap, 2015a). In contrast, economic hardship was supported by only 41% of those surveyed. Although respondents were not polled on the deemed motives of those *actually* entering Germany, it is safe to infer that individuals supporting current or increased arrivals generally perceived the displaced to have legitimate reasons for entering Germany and thus considered them as deserving of protection.

Throughout the year 2015, public support toward welcoming policies remained relatively high, although it eroded as the number of arrivals grew. From 73% in January, the percentage of respondents believing that Germany could welcome as many refugees or more decreased to 57% by July (Infratest Dimap, 2015b). A 57% approval rate for current or increased arrivals nonetheless represented significant solidarity toward the displaced in a context where it meant supporting approximately 75,000 arrivals per month (Grote, 2018, p. 16). The percentage of respondents considering that the country could cope with the “many refugees” even increased between July and September, despite an acceleration of arrivals over the same period (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). While confidence in the capacity of the country to handle the (large) number of refugees decreased to 45% in October, it grew back to 51% by December—which is relatively high in a context where approximately one million asylum seekers

had entered the country by the end of the year (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2015d, 2015e, 2015f, 2015g, 2015h; Grote, 2018).

According to Vollmer and Karakayali (2018, p. 120), “one can hardly overestimate the general euphoria that captured large parts of the civil society for a few months.” In 2017, a governmental study concluded that about 55% of the population had donated or otherwise been involved in supporting refugees since 2015 (BMFSFJ, 2017). Despite the strength of public mobilization in favor of refugees, anti-refugee demonstrations and violent attacks against asylum seekers also increased over the period under study (see Amnesty International, 2016; Dostal, 2015; Rietig & Müller, 2016). Support for the far-right party AfD steadily grew over the fall 2015, increasing from 3.5% of voting intentions in August to 8% by December (IfD Allensbach, 2019). These contrasting trends highlight the differentiated effects that arrivals had on civil society.

The mechanisms of openness

Process-tracing evidence shows that several factors must be considered to explain the relative openness of Germany during the refugee “crisis.” First, the agency of the displaced significantly shaped the possibilities of policy-making. Journalistic investigations note that Merkel was “alarmed” when she learned in August 2015 that the expected number of arrivals for the year had been revised from 450,000 to 800,000 (Abé et al., 2015; see also Blome et al., 2016a). Interior Minister Thomas de Maizièrre indicated that he needed to “prepare the German public to the fact that the number [of asylum seekers] will be significantly higher than we had previously predicted” (Die Bundeskanzlerin (The Federal Chancellor), 2015e). Journalistic investigations highlight how the decision to waive the Dublin procedure in relation to Syrian nationals was not made by governing elites but rather by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) as an internal measure designed to provide “some bureaucratic relief” to the agency (Abé et al., 2015; see also Blume et al., 2016; Blome et al., 2016b). Merkel noted that the decision triggered “a certain amount of confusion,” and led to the misunderstanding that “only to Germany could all Syrians come” (Die Bundesregierung (The Federal Government), 2015c; Alkousaa et al., 2016). The Chancellor insisted that the Dublin system remained the “legal basis [...] which is valid today” (Die Bundesregierung (The Federal Government), 2015c). These findings indicate that governing elites did not seek to trigger arrivals and rather remained wary of them.

Despite this wariness, governing elites did not close Germany’s borders. Two factors explain this decision. First, Merkel persistently demanded a so-called European solution to the “crisis,” and deemed the closure of Germany’s borders as harmful and counter-productive to those ends (see e.g. Die Bundeskanzlerin (The Federal Chancellor), 2015f, 2015g, 2015h; Die Bundesregierung (The Federal Government), 2015f). However, European counterparts were to remain relatively uncooperative, and efforts to establish a mandatory refugee quota system failed (see Zaun, 2018). Secondly, several journalistic investigations note that policy-makers—most notably Merkel—feared closing Germany’s borders for the images of violence these measures would generate (see Blume et al., 2016; Abé et al., 2015; Blome et al., 2016c, 2016d; Alkousaa et al., 2016). As Blume et al. (2016) put it, Merkel was “extremely wary of such images and of their political impact, and she [was] convinced that Germany wouldn’t tolerate them.”⁷

These findings suggest both top-down and bottom-up influences of refugee representations and perceptions in policy-making. On the one hand, the agency of the displaced—which entailed that policy-makers only had limited control over arrivals—and regional constraints and interests—which limited possibilities for border control—are likely to have motivated, at least partly, Merkel’s welcoming discourses toward the displaced. From this perspective, Merkel drew upon welcoming representations and perceptions of the displaced in an attempt to legitimize her response to the “crisis.” This perspective aligns more closely with the top-down approach.

On the other hand, bottom-up influences are also perceivable in the decision to keep borders open to avoid upsetting the German public with images of violence and suffering. The welcoming

representations and perceptions of the displaced that were mobilized by the public and the media during most of the period under study are also likely to have facilitated policy-making in an otherwise highly constrained context. While Merkel's own welcoming rhetoric likely contributed to the (re)production of this relatively welcoming environment, more research is warranted to assess the extent of this effect.⁸ Time order is indeed insufficient to assess the effect of elite discourses on the public and the media as these three sets of actors remained generally welcoming toward the displaced throughout most of the period under study.

Together, top-down and bottom-up approaches therefore provide a nuanced account of the use and influence of representations and perceptions of the displaced in the emergence and perpetuation of the moment of openness experienced in Germany until January 2016.

The decline in openness

As discussed above, German policy-makers remained wary of the number of asylum seekers reaching the country. Several governing elites, including within Merkel's own party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), questioned the capacity of the country to manage the number of arrivals and raised the need for a cap to them (see Deutsche Welle, 2015c, 2015n, 2015s, 2015t). Governing elites were also cognizant of limits to social acceptance (see Deutsche Welle, 2014c, 2015j, 2015u; Spiegel 2015c; Die Bundeskanzlerin (The Federal Chancellor), 2015e; Abé et al., 2015; Alkousaa et al., 2016). Such awareness is exemplified in de Maizièrè's intention in August 2015 to "prepare the German public" to substantially higher numbers of arrivals than previously anticipated (Die Bundeskanzlerin (The Federal Chancellor), 2015e). In October 2015, Gabriel and Steinmeier warned that Germans would "only accept our policies on the long term if we avoid overwhelming their willingness to help" (Spiegel 2015c). In November 2015, the CDU and CSU committed to limiting immigration "to a degree that does not exceed social acceptance" (Deutsche Welle, 2015u).

Although Merkel refused to set an upper limit on asylum, she sought to curtail its access. In addition to expanding Germany's list of safe countries of origin and limiting family reunification, the Chancellor frequently insisted on the need to "secure" the external borders of the European Union (EU), particularly by enhancing cooperation with Turkey (see e.g. Die Bundeskanzlerin (The Federal Chancellor), 2015g, 2015h, 2015i). As she claimed in September 2015, "the refugee crisis can only be resolved and the EU's external borders secured if Turkey is involved" (Die Bundeskanzlerin (The Federal Chancellor), 2015i). The *Joint EU-Turkey Action Plan* was concluded in November 2015, through which Ankara committed to curtail border crossings to Europe and improve the conditions and prospects of refugees living in Turkey (Die Bundeskanzlerin (The Federal Chancellor), 2015j; Grote, 2018, p. 24). Such efforts were pursued in 2016 and led to the *EU-Turkey statement*, which claimed to return "all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into Greek islands as from 20 March 2016" (European Council, 2016). The number of arrivals to Europe significantly decreased over the same period (Grote, 2018).

The persistent efforts by political elites throughout the period under study to curb the number of asylum seekers, combined with an awareness of limits to social acceptability, therefore suggest that policy-makers *anticipated* a shift in societal representations and perceptions of the displaced. Regional considerations and concerns over images of suffering at Germany's borders shaped restrictionism toward the EU's external borders. These findings align with the bottom-up approach, which conceives societal representations and perceptions of the displaced as potential constraints on the conduct of refugee policy-making.⁹

The actual shift in societal representations and perceptions of the displaced occurred in January 2016, as word spread that "dozens of groups of North African and Arab-looking men," including asylum seekers, had assaulted more than ninety women in Cologne on New Year's Eve (Deutsche Welle, 2016b, 2016c).¹⁰ This shift is captured in public opinion polls. From 51% in December 2015, the percentage of German respondents believing that the country could handle the (large) number of refugees fell to 37% in January 2016 (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2016a). The events in Cologne were identified by 33% of respondents as having significantly changed their attitudes

on asylum affairs (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2016a).¹¹ Support for the AfD increased by two points over the same period, reaching 10% in January 2016 (IfD Allensbach, 2019).

Meanwhile, consensus remained over the righteousness of taking in war refugees. In February 2016, 94% of respondents agreed with such an obligation—a figure that was just as high in January 2015 (Infratest Dimap, 2016, p. 7). These findings suggest that the perceived moral obligation of providing asylum was not questioned by the events in Cologne as much as the deemed deservingness of those benefitting from that asylum. In their analysis of the evolution of German public attitudes toward immigrants and refugees between April 2015 and January 2016, Czymara and Schmidt-Catran (2017) similarly conclude that while Germans were “clearly supportive of migrants in need,” they became increasingly “critical about those who *actually* enter[ed] their country as refugees” (p. 746).

Media representations and perceptions also became more negative from January 2016 onwards. According to Vollmer and Karakayali’s analysis of German media coverage, the assaults in Cologne triggered a “re-demonizing process” (2018, p. 133) through which the displaced were constructed as undeserving migrants once more. Several media outlets implied a betrayal, stating for example that “trust has been lost” (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, in Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018, p. 130). In their discourse and content analysis of German media coverage, Holzberg et al. similarly refer to the events in Cologne as having “sparked the most volatile debates around the threat that refugees are assumed to pose to the fabric of German society” (2018, p. 545). Among prevalent frames was that of “black and Arab men as hyper-sexualized and misogynist,” while Muslim women were frequently depicted as the “creators of their presumably oppressive situation” by passing “Islamist values” of misogyny and sexual violence to their sons (Holzberg et al., 2018, p. 546; see also Winter et al., 2018, p. 24).

Elite representations and perceptions of the displaced also became more negative during the winter of 2016. Several statements suggested that the events in Cologne emanated from sociocultural patterns that had to be carefully dismantled through proper integration (see Die Bundesregierung (The Federal Government), 2016a; 2016b; Die Bundeskanzlerin (The Federal Chancellor), 2016; Deutsche Welle, 2016c). De Maizièrè warned that “no parallel societies [would] be accepted” (Die Bundesregierung (The Federal Government), 2016b; Die Bundeskanzlerin (The Federal Chancellor), 2016), while Merkel insisted that behavioral patterns and disrespect toward women among some groups had to be “decisively confront[ed], because I do not believe that these are only individual cases” (Deutsche Welle, 2016c). In a Social Democratic meeting, Gabriel was reported claiming that “something must now be done—otherwise people won’t understand us at all anymore” (Spiegel, 2016). In February 2016, the *Act on the Facilitation of Expulsions of Criminal Foreigners* was adopted. Federal government spokesperson Steffen Seibert justified its adoption by arguing that foreign citizens committing serious criminal offenses “jeopardise popular support within Germany for taking in those in need of our protection” (Die Bundesregierung (The Federal Government), 2016c). Justice Minister Heiko Maas defended the Act as “vital in order to protect the vast majority of innocent refugees in Germany [who] do not deserve to be lumped together with criminals” (Die Bundesregierung (The Federal Government), 2016a). Such developments suggest that the Act was adopted, at least partly, with the aim of controlling public contestation by appearing proactive in fighting crime. These findings further align with the bottom-up approach, according to which negative societal representations and perceptions exert pressure on policy-makers toward restrictionism.

Conclusion

This paper suggested a theory of moments of openness toward refugees in the Global North. It discussed the roles of key representations and perceptions of refugees and the mechanisms through which they may influence and enter into policy-making processes. This article also showed an application of this theoretical framework through the lens of Germany’s response to the 2015–2016 refugee “crisis.”

In line with theoretical expectations, asylum seekers arriving in Germany were predominantly conceived as deserving of protection by the public, the media, and governing elites for most of the period under study. Welcoming perceptions of relatedness, proximity, and connectedness to national identity were further mobilized by the media and governing elites.¹² Furthermore, decision-making processes uncovered both top-down and bottom-up influences in the emergence and evolution of the moment of openness. On the one hand, Merkel actively engaged in the politics of framing in order to legitimize her policy decisions, which were significantly shaped by the agency of the displaced and regional politics. On the other hand, the anticipated public outcry in case of refoulement at Germany's borders constituted yet another constraint on policy-making. Predominantly welcoming representations and perceptions of the displaced from both the public and the media are also likely to have facilitated policy-making toward openness, although the extent to which this welcoming environment was the result of Merkel's own discourses requires further research.

The collapse in welcoming representations and perceptions following the assaults on New Year's Eve 2016 is likewise observed across actors under study, although elite discourses indicate a deliberate effort to respond to public contestation. Concerns over public acceptance also precede its effective collapse in January 2016 and contribute to explaining the sustained effort by the German government to reduce refugee numbers, particularly by externalizing them away from the EU. These findings indicate significant bottom-up influences in the decline of openness experienced in Germany.

The case of Germany further highlights the fragility of some representational and perceptual registers. Deserving representations eventually backlashed against the displaced as the alleged assaults in Cologne challenged the narrative of innocence and suffering within which they were confined. It is likely that the perceived virtue of the German nation upon which political elites and the media had capitalized contributed to feeding perceptions of ingratitude and betrayal.

Germany's experience during the 2015–2016 refugee “crisis” therefore highlights the need to “embrace [the] contaminated reality [of a world without innocence] and let it be the site of new political emergence” (Ticktin, 2017, p. 588). How these “more substantial forms of transnational solidarity” (Holzberg et al., 2018, p. 548) may be attained, however, should be the object of further empirical research. By investigating how moments of openness emerge, evolve, and — crucially — decline, it may be possible to better understand how deeper solidarities may be sustained.

Notes

1. The “Global North” and “Global South” categories are used to capture the power asymmetries and border regimes at play between these groups. These categories should not be understood as immutable, but rather as “geopolitical and ideological” (Achiume, 2019, p. 1514).
2. Gibney rather refers to the concept of *regionality* to highlight the range of economic, social, and political interests that perceived proximity triggers. The regionality of Kosovo, Gibney argues, “gave a special impetus to Western involvement and interest that has been lacking in most other refugee-generating situations” (1999, p. 29).
3. The timeframe begins in 2011 with the Arab spring and ends in March 2016 with the conclusion of the EU-Turkey statement, which coincided with a substantial reduction in the number of arrivals in Europe (Grote, 2018).
4. *Deutsche Welle* is Germany's public international broadcaster. This outlet is therefore expected to capture key debates among political elites, although future research should consider a wider array of media sources in the German language.
5. While the CSU did voice security concerns about the influx (see *Deutsche Welle*, 2015o, 2015p), its main contention pertained to the incapacity of the country to face the number of arrivals and the need to set an upper limit to them (see e.g. *Deutsche Welle*, 2015l, 2015m, 2015p, 2015q). The party also feared political competition from the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD), which fiercely advocated for border closures - including through firearms (see *Deutsche Welle*, 2015r; Jäckle & König, 2017; Spiegel, 2015a).
6. While the Paris attacks in November 2015 created a first breach in that welcoming discourse, Vollmer and Karakayali note that the events had “only moderate implications,” with several outlets insisting on the need

not to compare “terrorists with refugees” (2018, p. 129). Holzberg et al. (2018) nonetheless perceive a spike in the coverage of negative consequences of refugee arrivals in the aftermath of the attacks (see also Winter et al., 2018).

7. In contrast, international norms do not appear to have significantly constrained decision-making as border closures were deemed legally possible (Alkousaa et al., 2016; Spiegel, 2015b).
8. Berry et al. (2015) and Gross (2015) both suggest influences of elite discourses on German media content, which would indicate top-down effects from elites to the media. Media reports are also identified as having had a significant effect on public mobilization (BMFSFJ, 2017). While these sources provide partial evidence of the impact that elite discourses may have had on the wider German society, these interaction effects are not the specific focus of these studies and further research should be devoted to those dynamics.
9. While capacity concerns are likely to have also motivated restrictionist efforts, they did not drive a substantial negative turn in elite representations and perceptions of refugees, as would be required under the top-down hypothesis.
10. On January 8, 2016, the federal police had identified 31 suspects, 18 of which were asylum seekers (Bundeskanzlerin, 2016). By January 9, 2016, 349 complaints had been reported to the Cologne police (see Deutsche Welle, 2016d). Assaults were also reported in other German cities (see Deutsche Welle, 2016c, 2016e).
11. Confidence over the capacity of the country to cope with the number of refugees nonetheless recovered over the winter as arrivals decreased (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2016b, 2016c; Grote, 2018).
12. This paper, however, cannot draw conclusions about the relative importance of each representation and perception in mobilizing sympathy. While deservingness indeed appears as a necessary condition, the catalyzing power of other perceptions should be further assessed in future research.

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Annex 1: Operationalization of key themes.

Theme	Operationalization
Deservingness	<p>Representations are qualified as <i>deserving</i> if they depict a particular group of displaced persons as worthy of the host community's "physical, economic, social, and health aid" (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016, p. 17). Notions of forced displacement, suffering, and innocence fall into this category. These representations are expected to intersect with gender and age, with women and children as the most likely emblems of deservingness.</p> <p>Undeservingness, by contrast, requires some questioning of the forced nature of displacement, suffering, and innocence of the displaced (e.g. abuse of asylum, opportunistic motivations, terrorist motivations, criminal offenses, illegal entry).</p>
Relatedness	<p>Following Gibney (1999), relatedness refers to the hosts' sense of identification with the displaced. Relatedness can be based on individualized narratives (Slovic et al., 2017), shared attributes such as humanity (Kirkwood, 2017), ethnicity, language, and culture (Gibney, 1999; El-Enany, 2016), or analogous historical experiences (van Selm, 2001).</p> <p>Unrelatedness would focus on the perceived differences between the receiving society and the displaced.</p>
Perceived proximity	<p>(Positive) perceived proximity is retrieved when speakers depict the displaced as 'close' to one region or country, thus justifying the access of that group to protection in the polity (van Selm, 2001).</p> <p>(Negative) perceived proximity would rather highlight the imminent threat the displaced pose for the host state.</p>
Connectedness to national identity	<p>Connectedness to national identity may encourage openness by depicting the plight of the displaced as linked to the understandings, myths, and symbols of the nation. This may be done, for instance, by highlighting the virtue and humanism of the nation for accepting refugees.</p> <p>Connectedness to national identity can also mobilize closure by drawing upon the threats that the displaced are perceived to pose to the nation.</p>