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# Debating irregular migration in the European Parliament: a ‘parliament without a public’ or the voice of the people?

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## ABSTRACT



The European Parliament (EP) has been characterised as a ‘working parliament without a public’ rather than as a ‘debating parliament’. However, this distinction was called into question when irregular migration became a sensitive topic and national political parties became polarised on this policy. Thus, this article explores whether one risk resulting from such a characterisation – a lack of public involvement – is raised by EU members in plenary debates on irregular migration issues. In particular, the analysis focuses on the purpose of EU plenaries and investigates the audience for speech acts in EP debates on irregular migration issues. The qualitative, manual content analysis of three debates shows that MEPs address their speeches to multiple audiences, including other MEPs, political groups and members of the Commission and Council, excluding national parties and voters. Speech acts aimed at EU officials, together with problem-solving argumentation, support the characterisation of the EP as a ‘working parliament without a public’. It contributes to maintaining the EU communication gap. In contrast, speakers legitimate their speeches by claiming to represent the common people, to be the *vox populi*. The article concludes by challenging the role of plenary debates in an age of rising Euroscepticism and populism.

## KEYWORDS

European Parliament; working parliament without a public; plenary; legitimization; irregular migration

## Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) is known for its second-order character and low public interest, resulting in a democratic deficit. However, the EP gained its importance as a legislature actor while closely working with the Council and Commission (e.g. Ripoll Servent and Costa 2021; Roederer-Rynning and Greenwood 2017). Lord (2018) characterises the EP as a ‘working parliament without a public’. This description has been questioned in recent, turbulent times, in which we can observe the greater politicisation of EU issues (Braun and Grande 2021). Thus, this article aims to examine the characterisation of a ‘working parliament without a public’ in the case of irregular migration from Africa and the Middle East, which polarised public opinion and was politicised, at least at the national level (Gianfreda 2018). Indeed, even in a time of pandemic, immigration together with economic issues were among the top three concerns at the EU level (Eurobarometer 2020). In particular, the article investigates the purpose of EP plenary debates by examining the audience targeted in speech acts within EP debates related to irregular migration. If MEPs, among other EU actors, do not direct their speech acts at the public in a policy area as sensitive as irregular migration, then this is less likely to happen in other policy areas.

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The goal was achieved through qualitative and manual content analysis of three debates, including 102 speech acts related to irregular migration. Manual coding allowed me to go deeper into the speech acts and observe the signals manifesting speakers' audience(s). The purpose of the debates might have created bias, which was eliminated by including debates of different procedures (ordinary legislative debate, resolution debate and the discharge procedure) in the sample. The other condition was to include debates from the final period of the eighth parliamentary term (2018–2019) to see how MEPs reacted to irregular migration issues after the 'migration crisis'. In this period, the EU was still discussing reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), which was introduced by the Commission in 2016 in two packages.<sup>1</sup> This discussion was projected in the sample (resolution debate) and consequently in the analysis. The content of the EU plenaries in the year of the crisis was already examined (see Högenauer 2017).

The results show that EU actors spoke to multiple audiences involved in the plenary sessions, excluding national parties and the public. This sheds light on the EU communication gap between EU institutions and European citizens (Seoane Pérez 2013). As a consequence, the EP loses the possibility of involving the public in EU debates, which is a necessary condition for maintaining the legitimacy of the parliament's work on policies and legislation. Nevertheless, the national context entered the plenary and MEPs tried to persuade their opponents through their speech acts. In particular, MEPs (but also the Commissioner and Council members) claimed to be the *vox populi* and this legitimisation in the MEPs' speech acts served as a strategy to discuss legislation, which corresponds to the concept of a 'working parliament without a public' (Lord 2018). In summary, although there is little public interest and EU actors did not address their speech acts to the public, the speakers examined claimed to be the voice of the people.

The article is structured as follows. First, Lord's (2018) characterisation of the EP as a 'working parliament without a public', linked with the EU communication gap, is introduced, including the EP's position on migration issues. Then, the sampling and method of analysis, which focus on the purpose of plenary debates in migration issues, are elaborated. The analysis itself follows the methodological part. The article concludes with a discussion of the results and a reassessment of the role of plenary debates.

## European Parliament as a working parliament without a public

Lord (2018), based on Weber's ([1918] 1994, 170–171), claims that the EP is better categorised as a 'working parliament' than a 'debating parliament'. The EP as a 'working parliament' is characterised by five attributes: (1) plenary debates are not attempts to persuade an opponent to change his or her mind; (2) for much of the work, real decision-making in the EP takes place in the committees; (3) the work is done mainly by (shadow) rapporteurs and by the co-ordinators of each political group in the committees; (4) the EP is directly involved in the work on legislation; and (5) there is routine cooperation between MEPs from different political groups to reach agreement. Although such characteristics may produce some benefits resulting in legislation based on technocratic expertise and refraining from political and populist games, the risks of such a system should not be underestimated.

As Lord (2018) argues, the EP's success in accumulating expertise and cooperating with the Commission and Council, and the EP's second-order character, contribute to limited politicisation and low public interest. He conceives of the EP as a 'working parliament without a public', which may result in several risks (Lord (2018), 44–45). The first risk is that 'working parliaments obscure parliaments as places of visible public debate, which communicate the political system to the public'. The second is that 'working parliaments may themselves be a part of the substitution of technocracy for politics', which means that representatives become experts on a specific topic and lose the ability to represent their voters on large-scale topics. Third, working with the Council and the Commission may result in another risk: MEPs are more exposed to the values and standpoints of EU institutions

other than those they represent, which may be manifested in MEPs' positions (see also Vasilopoulou and Gattermann 2021). Finally, a working parliament, which must play its role in the decision-making process, risks becoming over-dependent on information provided by lobbies.

As a consequence, the 'working parliament' reduces the possibility of the establishment of European public spheres (Rivas-de-Roca and García-Gordillo 2022). Moreover, the EP and other EU institutions get hardly any media attention, which creates a communication gap between EU representatives and citizens (e.g. Anderson and McLeod 2004; Souliotis 2022). This gap is rooted in cultural (no European demos) and structural (a unique combination of diplomacy, technocracy and corporatism) deficits (Seoane Pérez 2013). Similarly, from the structural point of view, the limits of the EP representative function are strongly impacted by a multi-level governance (MLG) system 'built on the prominent role of technocracy, non-majoritarian institutions and de-politicization' (Salvati 2021, 12). This article, by looking at how the EP functions, using the concept of a 'working parliament without a public', explores the structural deficit.

The dual character of the EP also contributes to technocracy and low public interest. As scholars examining the roll-call votes argue, MEPs are agents of two principals (their national party and their European political group), and often favour their national party position on sensitive topics (e.g. Hix 2002; Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007). However, it is necessary to distinguish between voting and rhetoric. As Slapin and Proksch (2010) explain, the (legislative) plenary debates serve as a communication tool between MEPs, political groups and national parties. MEPs use plenary debates to explain their national parties' positions to other members of their EP political groups and to put themselves in the spotlight to ensure their re-election. Security-oriented authors offer the concept of multiple audiences, which might be helpful in this context. As Neal (2009) argues, 'there is no methodological prescription which says the "audience" of security discourses must be "public", and in the EU context the "audience" may well be made up of bureaucrats, experts and political professionals'. Thus, within the securitisation process, there can be multiple audiences who are not necessarily composed of the public, and their reaction depends on the political context within which they are situated (e.g. Balzacq 2005; Kaunert and Léonard 2012b).

Although MEPs do not prioritise the topics that most concern the public, MEPs talk a great deal about environmental and migration issues (Pennetreau and Laloux 2021). This might mean that MEPs are reactive to public opinion and societal concerns, at least in migration policy (Pennetreau and Laloux 2021). However, other studies indicate that MEPs do not respond to the call of the public on irregular migration issues. MEPs take a more 'pro-immigrant'<sup>2</sup> stand on migration than their voters (Vasilopoulou and Gattermann 2013) and other EU institutions (Kaunert and Léonard 2012a). Moreover, it seems that the 'pro-immigrant' position in the EP (non-legislative) plenary debates prevails (Krotký and Kaniok 2021) and 'the style of debate in the EP remained profoundly supranational' even during the 'migration crisis' (Högenauer 2017, 1105). There are studies (Güler 2019; Tekin 2019) investigating 'anti-immigrant' and securitised discourses delivered in the EP. However, these studies mainly focus on Eurosceptic and populist political groups such as EFDD and ENF.<sup>3</sup> Saliency and focus on these two groups might skew the overall picture of the EP towards migration.

To sum up, by investigating the target audience for the speakers' speech acts in plenary debates on irregular migration, this research sheds light on the communication gap between the EP and citizens, using the concept of a 'working parliament without a public'. Examining the target audience helps us better to understand why, in plenary, MEPs tend to take a liberal approach to irregular migration (Krotký and Kaniok 2021) and favour a responsibility-sharing mechanism for the Dublin reforms (Ripoll Servent 2019; Kaufmann 2021), which in some countries (e.g. the Visegrad group) resonate very negatively (Zaun 2018).

## Research question, sample and method

As implied, this article aims to profoundly investigate the context and role of EP plenary debates. The main research question of this article is: 'How do speakers reflect the "audience" in their plenary speech acts related to irregular migration issues?' The EP database was used to select pertinent

debates. Using keywords (migrant, migrants, migration, refugee, refugees, asylum and the Mediterranean), the database was searched for relevant debates during the last two years of the eighth (EU) parliamentary term (2018–2019). Based on the keywords, 12 debates were found that corresponded to the irregular migration issue; see [Table A2](#).

The total population for the research file was reduced by filtering according to the purpose of each debate, to ensure a diverse sample. As Ripoll Servent (2015) argues, by obtaining co-decision power (ordinary legislative procedure), the EP changed its liberal stance on migration issues to be more adaptable in negotiating with the Council. On the other hand, non-legislative procedures are informal tools the EP uses to become an agenda-setter, publicly sending the EP's priorities to the Commission and other EU actors (Kreppel and Webb 2019; Webb and Kreppel 2021). According to Maurer (2003), 'initiative reports and resolutions reflect MEP awareness and interest in raising an issue with the public and with the Council and the Commission'. In addition to (non-)legislative and budgetary functions, the EP has a discharge authority to implement the EU general budget. The EP, apart from giving the discharge to the Commission, has the power to give discharge to European agencies. The EP can use this procedure as a tool to put pressure on agencies. However, the EP lacks stronger sanctioning powers because it cannot change or remove an agency's leadership (Scholten 2011).

Thus, to reduce bias and determine the possible influence of each debate's purpose, the final sample included one ordinary legislative debate about establishing the Asylum and Migration Fund. This debate was held before the vote of the first reading. Then, one discharge procedure concerning the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) and one resolution debate, in which MEPs called to adopt the Dublin reform, were also selected; see [Table A2](#). These three debates included 102 speech acts (the resolution debate  $N = 70$ , the ordinary legislative debate  $N = 20$ , discharge procedure  $N = 12$ ). Hand-based content analysis was used to examine these speech acts. Although such a method is unsuitable for large samples, it allows for language sensitivity<sup>4</sup> and prevents the context of the information from being lost (Krippendorff 2013). That was the reason for the sample reduction.

When the speaker directly addressed the speech to someone, that audience was coded. For example, Jonathan Bullock (EFDD; UKIP) addressed his speech to MEPs in the discharge procedure: 'I urge MEPs to reject discharge for the EU Asylum Support Office'. At the beginning of each speech, MEPs usually address their speech to the EP president, who chairs the debate. This is part of the parliament's rules and customs and, therefore, was not included in the coding process. The exception was written contributions delivered after the plenary sessions, in which welcoming, polite sentences were missing. This confirms that automatic content analysis would not have been helpful in this task. Moreover, hand-based content analysis can reveal indirect addressing through carefully reading the context of the speech act. For example, Claude Moraes (S&D; Labour Party), in the resolution debate, addressed his speech to MEPs, although he did not mention them directly:

At the forefront of our minds, we must retain the understanding that, *here in this Chamber*, we must show leadership. That requires us, in this window of opportunity, to go for Dublin IV, for all of those asylum files, and then to implement them and make them happen. This is not some sort of dream; it is the obvious imperative for this *Chamber*.

To include such oblique references, the audience was coded when the speech was addressed to someone either directly or indirectly.

A total of 102 speech acts were coded in Atlas.ti; the analysis unit was the sentence or a couple of sentences – for example, see Moraes's speech above. In another way, if two addresses were present in different parts of one speech, these were coded twice. Speech acts were spoken by MEPs ( $N = 94$ ), and were categorised according to their roles in the plenary debates. The analysis distinguishes whether they spoke as a president in charge of the debate ( $N = 1$ ),<sup>5</sup> rapporteurs ( $N = 6$ ), MEPs speaking on behalf of their political groups ( $N = 19$ ), ordinary MEPs without specific function ( $N = 49$ ), MEPs contributing in written form after the debate ( $N = 11$ ) or MEPs asked or responding to

a question raised by other MEPs via the so-called ‘blue card’<sup>6</sup> procedure (N = 8). Speech acts of members of the Commission (N = 6) and the European Council (N = 2) were investigated to see whether and how their reflection of the audience differed from that of MEPs.

The length of speech acts is based on EP rules, as MEPs always have one minute for their speech (European Parliament 2019). The exceptions are rapporteurs and MEPs speaking on behalf of a political group, who tend to have more time. However, the longest speech act (1,067 words, almost ten minutes) was delivered by the commissioner, who, as host, is less restricted by the EP time limit. In contrast, the shortest speech acts (around 50 words) were always delivered by MEPs under the ‘blue card’ procedure. MEPs who contribute after a debate, in written form, are restricted to 200 words (European Parliament 2019), which corresponds roughly to a two-minute speech. This is another symptom of the technocratic environment of the EP, which might have had an impact on the research results.

### Speaking to each other and moving legislation forward

How do speakers reflect their ‘audience’ in their plenary speech acts about irregular migration issues? The first part of the answer to this question involves a focus on to whom speakers address their speech acts. As Slapin and Proksch (2010) argue, (legislative) plenary debates serve as a communication tool between MEPs, political groups and national parties. Thus, there is a multiple audience for EP plenary debates (e.g. Balzacq 2005; Kaunert and Léonard 2012b); see Table 1. This section sheds light on the purpose of plenary debates and connects it with the concept of a ‘working parliament’.

In the category ‘Audience – EP’, MEPs communicated with each other and spoke to other bodies of the EP (N = 26). Such addresses are represented in the previous methodology section by speech acts delivered by Bullock and Moraes. In particular, Moraes’s speech act clearly illustrates the ‘working’ attitude of the EP, which should go ‘for all of those asylum files, and then to implement them and make them happen’. However, the category ‘Audience – EP’ also consists of speech acts which MEPs address to whole political groups. For example, Notis Marias (ECR; Greece, Another Path) answered a blue card in the discharge procedure debate and called on the members of the EPP not to give discharge to the EASO: ‘However, we [ECR] are not going to grant the exemption and I think that you [EPP] should also consider your attitude tomorrow as EPP’. Moreover, Marias tried to persuade his opponent to change his mind, which is contrary to the first attribute of a ‘working parliament’ (Weber [1918] 1994).

**Table 1.** Speakers and their audiences.

	Audience – Commission	Audience – Council	Audience – EP	Audience – undefined	Audience – public/ national party
MEP – president N = 1	2	2	0	0	0
MEP – rapporteur N = 6	2	0	5	1	0
MEP – on behalf of the group N = 19	2	1	4	1	0
MEP N = 49	2	11	9	0	0
MEP – in writing N = 11	0	1	0	0	0
MEP – blue card N = 8	1	0	4	0	0
Commission N = 6	0	0	3	1	0
Council N = 2	0	0	1	0	0
Totals	9	15	26	3	0

The importance of MEPs, the EP and its bodies as a primary audience of plenary debates is supported by Council and Commission speakers, who reacted and addressed their contributions to the EP or its MEPs; see [Table 1](#). For example, Monika Panayotova, deputy minister for the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU, who took part in the resolution debate, reacted to the MEPs' calls to act in the name of CEAS reform.

Many of *you* referred today to the reform of the Dublin Regulation system and – sharing the common understanding that the European Union needs a properly functioning common asylum system – the Council has not stopped working to enhance the security of our citizens, to strengthen border control and to manage the migratory process more efficiently. The Council has listened to *you* carefully and we welcome *Parliament's* input in this debate.

She wanted to assure the EP that the Council was aware of the EP position related to the CEAS.

Meanwhile, the Commission as an audience was represented in all the debates, while the Council as an audience for MEPs' speeches was represented exclusively in the resolution debate; see [Table 2](#). One explanation for this is that members of the Council were present only for this analysed debate, while members of the Commission were present at all three debates. Another explanation lies in the topic and procedure of the debate. The Council is not involved in the discharge procedure at all. In the ordinary legislative procedure, debate takes place before the vote on the first reading. Thus, the EP and its MEPs needed to find a united position before the inter-institutional negotiations with the Council and Commission. Conversely, a resolution might be used by MEPs as an opportunity to raise an issue (Maurer 2003). In this debate, MEPs called for the adoption of the Dublin IV reform, as is illustrated by the speech act delivered by Teresa Jiménez-Becerril Barrio (EPP; PP):

The responsibility lies with Europe: neither Spain nor any country should take on this challenge alone. That is why *I demand that the Commission and the Council urgently approve* the new Dublin Regulation, with clear rules, but, above all, that they are followed.

Barrio's call to action corresponds to the argumentation patterns in the EP plenary, which exhibited problem-solving argumentation (Garssen 2016).

Nevertheless, MEPs did not persuade the (European) Council to take action on CEAS reform. As Ripoll Servent (2019) explains: 'The EP successfully managed to form a united position and frame the crisis as a failure of previous CEAS reforms, but that this was not sufficient to break the deadlock among member states'.<sup>7</sup> Among the actors who unsuccessfully tried to pressure the Council (and Commission) was the EP's president, Antonio Tajani (EPP; Forza Italia), who first welcomed the speakers and opened the resolution debate, which is his task as president. According to rule 22, paragraph three, 'the President may speak in a debate only to sum up or to call speakers to order. Should the President wish to take part in a debate, he or she shall vacate the chair and shall not reoccupy it until the debate is over' (European Parliament 2019). However, Tajani broke this rule when he called for the adoption of the Dublin Regulation in his speech:

**Table 2.** MEPs' audiences and purposes of the debates.

	Audience – Commission	Audience – Council	Audience – EP	Audience – undefined	Audience – public/national party
Ordinary legislative procedure N = 20	2	0	1	2	0
Discharge N = 12	3	0	8	0	0
Resolution N = 70	4	15	17	1	0
Totals	9	15	26	3	0



That is why I strongly *urge the Commission and the Council to act*. The polemics between states – who is tougher, who is more responsible – are useless. [...] That is why, Commissioner, Madam Council representative, I *ask you* to take the request from this Parliament very seriously. We do not intend to remain silent, we do not intend to play the role of the paper passer, we intend to be protagonists in the solution of a historic problem for the European Union.

This section demonstrates that the ‘working’ setting of EP debates, in which speakers address their speech acts to each other, inhibits the creation of European public spheres and maintains the EU communication gap. I discuss the purpose of plenary debates which aim to move legislation forwards. Even though the EP has no power to introduce new legislation, it can effectively shape the EU policy agenda through its ‘own initiative reports’ (Webb and Kreppel 2021). The salience of the issue and the inter-institutional connections of the rapporteur are the best indicators of such influence (Webb and Kreppel 2021). Contrary to this, the analysis shows that the EP’s resolution and the ‘non-silence’ of MEPs, including the EP president’s commitment, were weak tools to force the Council (and Commission) to act in the name of CEAS reform. Notwithstanding this, the strong urge to put legislation forward corresponds with the ‘working parliament’ concept.

### Claim to be *vox populi* as a legitimization strategy

The previous section demonstrated that there were a number of audiences for the EP plenary debates, not really involving public or national parties, and that MEPs tried to move legislation forwards in the EP debates. This corresponds to the notion of a ‘working parliament without a public’. I also touched on the persuading strategy developed by Notis Marias, which does not correspond to the concept of a ‘working parliament’. In this section, I show how the national parties and public are reflected by speakers and eventually used as a subject of legitimization and argumentation strategies.

As implied in the previous section, the addressing of national parties or the public was not present in any debate, including the legislative debate; see Table 2. In my sample, the legislative debate was held before the vote on the first reading. This might be the reason (apart from the methodological focus), why I did not find any signals sent by MEPs to national parties to assure them about MEPs’ ideological positions (cf. Slapin and Proksch 2010). Thus, the explanation of the votes for the national parties might follow. Nevertheless, it means that national actors are informed after the votes, and are not addressed in the debates that precede decision-making. Such findings correspond to the setting of a ‘working parliament’ and contribute to low public interest.

Nevertheless, national issues were present in my sample. For example, Eleonora Foreza (GUE/NGL; The Other Europe) spoke to Italian MEPs from the M5S during the resolution debate:

I ask the colleagues of the M5S, with many of whom I worked in this European Parliament: how do you define, if not as xenophobic, the one who talks about ‘godsend’<sup>8</sup> when referring to the refugees that come to Italy? How do you define the one who celebrates that a ship with 600 people aboard is forced to reach Spain?

Foreza criticised the M5S, which built a government with the right-wing populist party, the Northern League, led by Matteo Salvini. The criticism was based on Salvini’s ‘xenophobic’ attitudes. Thus, by mentioning the M5S and details from Italian politics, it seems that national politics entered the plenary debate. However, Foreza still did not turn to her voters or her national party. Her speech was addressed to other MEPs from M5S, to persuade them not to follow national immigration policy. This is quite contrary to the first attribute of a ‘working parliament’.

Moreover, in the sample, it was observed that speakers claimed to speak on behalf of the people (N = 17); see Table 3. This serves as a legitimization strategy for their speech acts. Legitimation means a process of giving a positive, appropriate sense and credit to a social practice (Van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999). The legitimization technique of claiming to speak on behalf of the general public was observed in all three debates (see Table 4) and was used by all speakers; see Table 3. Speakers who were the most time-restricted were least likely to use such legitimization. Ordinary MEPs without specific function delivered such speech act legitimization in four cases, although it was the most



**Table 3.** Speakers and legitimization on behalf of the people.

	<i>vox populi</i>	Legitimized by
MEP – president N = 1	1	Antonio Tajani (EPP; Forza Italia)
MEP – rapporteur N = 6	2	Miriam Dalli (S&D; PL), <i>used twice in one speech</i>
MEP – on behalf of the group N = 19	4	Gilles Lebreton (ENF; National Rally); Mara Bizzotto (ENF; Northern League); Jonathan Bullock (EFDD; UKIP); Philippe Lamberts (Greens/EFA; Ecolo)
MEP N = 49	4	Inés Ayala Sender (S&D; PSOE); Flavio Zanonato (S&D; Article One); Ana Maria Miranda Paz (Greens/EFA; BNG); Teresa Jiménez-Becerril Barrio (EPP; PP)
MEP – in writing N = 11	2	Alfred Sant (S&D; PL); Josef Weidenholzer (S&D; SPÖ)
MEP – blue card N = 8	1	Petri Sarvamaa (EPP; NCP)
Commission N = 6	2	Dimitris Avramopoulos, <i>used twice in different speech acts</i>
Council N = 2	1	Monika Panayotova
Totals	17	

**Table 4.** Legitimation on behalf of the people used in the debates.

	<i>vox populi</i>
Ordinary legislative procedure N = 20	4
Discharge N = 12	3
Resolution N = 70	10
Totals	17

represented group of speakers (N = 49). MEPs speaking under the ‘blue card’ procedure (N = 8) legitimised their speech act in just one case. Then, the purpose (social practice) of legitimization differed, depending on the type of speaker.

In the previous section, I demonstrated that a member of the Council, Panayotova, responded to calls to action for CEAS reform, addressing her speech to the EP and its MEPs. She mentioned ‘citizens’ in her speech, though they were hardly its audience. She said in the resolution debate: ‘the Council has not stopped working *to enhance the security of our citizens, to strengthen border control and to manage the migratory process more efficiently*’. ‘Citizens’ in her speech was used as part of a legitimization argument for strengthening security measures. Similarly, Dimitris Avramopoulos, a former EU commissioner for migration, home affairs and citizenship, said in the ordinary legislative debate:

Migration and *security* continue to be among the main concerns of our *citizens* today. We need enough resources to support our actions in these areas in line with our political priorities and in complementarity with all EU funds.

In other words, by security concerns and on behalf of ‘citizens’, Avramopoulos legitimised the approval of the new Migration and Asylum Fund.

Besides MEPs from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and right-wing political groups (Krotký and Kaniok 2021), the securitisation of migration was developed by external speakers such as a member of the Commission or Council in the EP plenary. The EP is among the most liberal institutions on migration issues (Kaunert and Léonard 2012a), which may explain why the members of the Council and Commission focused on the legitimization of the securitisation of migration in the EU debates.

MEPs as an audience of the securitisation process correspond to Neal's (2009) assumption that the audience in the EU context (and in the securitisation process) may be made up of bureaucrats, experts and political professionals.

Claiming to be the *vox populi* appeared in a number of MEPs' speeches. For example, Gilles Lebreton (on behalf of the ENF; National Rally) criticised the new version of the Asylum and Migration Fund in the ordinary legislative debate as follows: 'Once again, *you* want to betray European civilization. We will alert the *peoples of Europe* to prevent *you* from doing so'. It is unclear to whom Lebreton was speaking when he used the pronoun 'you', whether to MEPs or members of the Commission and Council. Thus, his speech was coded as 'Audience – undefined'. Nevertheless, in his speech, his use of 'peoples of Europe' served as a populist argument to legitimise his critique of CEAS reform and responsibility-sharing mechanisms. As Foster, Grzymiski, and Brusenbauch Meislová (2021, 79–80) explain, populists, 'by claiming to be the *vox populi*, delegitimise technocratic or centrist opponents as "rootless cosmopolitans" at best, or "traitors" at worst, and place them outside their legitimate area of "the political"'. On the other hand, technocrats legitimise their position and governance through solutions negotiated via unelected specialists, expertise and data.

Legitimation by claiming to represent the people was also used by MEPs from mainstream political groups representing 'technocratic governance'. For example, Josef Weidenholzer (S&D; SPÖ) added (in writing) to the resolution debate:

Proposals for reforming the European asylum system have been around for a long time and are repeatedly delayed. *People* don't expect rhetoric, they expect solutions. The European Parliament is constantly renewing its clear position: We need legal entry options, clearly defined distribution quotas and financial support for the countries of origin.

Similarly, the EP president legitimised the Dublin reform and the EP itself by claiming that it 'represents half a billion European *citizens*'. Regarding the question of the EP as a 'working parliament without a public', such legitimacy is actually grounded in a low turnout, little politicisation and the democratic deficit.

Thus, even though national issues were observed in my sample, the EP debates on irregular migration analysed remained rather transnational, as was also examined by Högenauer (2017). Nevertheless, speakers used national context to persuade other actors, or they legitimised their speeches by claiming to represent the people. The purpose of such legitimation differed. On the one hand, speakers claimed to be the *vox populi* to enhance the securitisation of migration. On the other hand, they used it as a legitimation strategy to defend or attack new legislation, such as Dublin IV or the Migration and Asylum Fund, depending on whether they came from the populist or technocratic side. Although persuading each other and legitimation strategy do not really fit into the 'working parliament' characterisation, it was very often connected with attempts to put legislation forward, which is the aim of the 'working parliament'.

## Discussion and conclusion

By examining EP plenary debates, this article sheds light on the communication gap between the EP and its voters. Even though the national context entered the plenary and MEPs tried to persuade their opponents, the content and addresses of the EU actors' speeches in debates concerning irregular migration tended to support the characterisation of the EP as a 'working parliament without a public' (Lord 2018). Although speakers addressed their speeches to multiple audiences, national parties and voters were not among them. This is well described by scholars (Habermas 2015; Högenauer 2017) who claim the non-existence of a bridge between MEPs and their national parties. Moreover, the resolution debate in which MEPs, by use of problem-solving argumentation (Garsen

2016), called for the adoption of Dublin IV, supports the idea of a 'working parliament without a public'. Nevertheless, the resolution debate and the EP president's involvement were weak tools to persuade the Commission and Council to act.

The public was reflected in the speech acts only as part of a legitimisation strategy. This explains why 'pro-immigrant' stances towards irregular migration prevailed in the EP plenary debates (Krotký and Kaniok 2021). MEPs from the mainstream political groups did not target voters or national parties in the EP plenary. Thus, they did not need to use securitisation as a discursive strategy to gain political capital and public attention (Balzacq 2005). Instead, they used the EP plenary to criticise the 'xenophobic' attitudes of Matteo Salvini and non-action of the (European) Council in CEAS reform. On the other hand, the Council is among the most restrictive institutions regarding irregular migration issues (Kaunert and Léonard 2012a), and the Commission must balance the different positions of the EP and Council. That might be why speakers from these institutions legitimised the securitisation of migration by claiming to be the *vox populi*. Legitimation by claiming to represent the people was also used by MEPs. As expected, the populists delegitimised technocrats (Foster, Grzymiski, and Brusenbauch Meislová 2021). However, MEPs from mainstream political groups claimed to be the *vox populi*, too, to legitimise further legislation on migration issues. Further research might focus on the perception of EU legitimisation strategies, including claims to be the *vox populi*, among EU voters across different countries and social groups.

Lord (2018) identifies several risks implied by the 'working parliament without a public'. These might be summed up as a necessity for public control to increase the responsibility of representing their voters and improve democratic legitimacy. As scholars (Foster, Grzymiski, and Brusenbauch Meislová 2021) argue, European politics is dominated by a struggle between technocracy and right-wing populism. Thus, the non-involvement of the public might result in right-wing populism and Euroscepticism taking control of EU governance. Speaking to voters and national parties might be one of the tools MEPs can use 'to move away from the dominion of inter-institutional conflict towards representing the party-political conflict', as Salvati (2021) suggests. However, the current technocratic EP plenary debates with strict time limits do not allow rich narratives and legitimisation strategies to be developed and, thus, maintain the EU communication gap.

Future research should focus on the differences between national and transnational parliamentary debates, since some voices may fairly argue that MEPs' speech acts constitute regular political communication. Why should MEPs and other EU bureaucrats speak to their voters or national parties, which are not present at the debate, and why should they try to get the attention of those not part of the EU's technocratic governance? Some may argue that politicians speak to each other even in national parliaments, and they also rely on technocracy, using 'science as an abstract category of justification in parliamentary talk' (Qadir and Syväterä 2021, 286). In short, such voices argue that politicians generally get public attention through different channels, such as social and public media.

In fact, MEPs very often speak in their national languages in EU plenaries, and they post recordings of their speeches on social media to get public attention. However, as research analysing Twitter accounts during the 2014 European Parliament election campaign shows, anti-EU party candidates were much more successful in capturing citizens' attention than tweets from mainstream candidates (Nulty et al. 2016). Moreover, the media generally prefer negative news, which is true when they report about the EU. This results in a 'spiral of Euroscepticism', feeding Eurosceptic and populist parties (Galpin and Trenz 2017). For that reason, this article challenges the role and content of plenary debates in the EP and at the national level.

## Notes

1. The first package consists of a regulation to reform the Dublin system, a regulation to amend Eurodac and a proposal to establish an EU Asylum Agency replacing the EASO. The second package consists of a new regulation to replace the Asylum Procedures Directive and Qualification Directive, and to modify the Reception Conditions Directive (European Parliament 2021). Discussion about CEAS reform focuses mainly on the Dublin

reform, known as Dublin IV. This means that it is the most sensitive suggestion of CEAS reform, consisting of a responsibility-sharing mechanism. In this article, when CEAS reform is mentioned, it relates mainly to the reform of the Dublin system.

2. Scholars also distinguish between communitarian and cosmopolitan positions. The latter prevails in the EP and among European elites (de Wilde et al. 2019).
3. In my sample, the MEPs came from the whole ideological spectrum; see Table A1 with party abbreviations. Occasionally, the MEPs changed the membership of the national party or political group during the eighth term. Thus, the affiliation was assigned according to the date of the debate. An example of membership fluctuation is the party of Swedish Democrats, a former member of the EFDD and currently part of the ECR.
4. Most of the speech acts (N = 74) were delivered in the speakers' national languages. In total, 13 languages were observed in my sample. I did not rely on the EP translation service that offers a recorded interpretation of the speeches. This interpretation proved to be insufficient for the content analysis. The speeches in the national languages were instead translated into English using Google Translate, since the quality of human and machine translation overlaps (de Vries, Schoonvelde, and Schumacher 2018). In another research project which is under review, the translation of the 27 speech acts spoken in nine European languages were sent to native speakers to check grammar and style. The native speakers confirmed the high accuracy of the automatic translation. The most common mistakes were incorrect word order. For this analysis, a native Italian speaker was consulted about better understanding contextual and linguistic issues; see Footnote 8. For these reasons, I am not aware of possible linguistic bias.
5. Just a political speech act from the president were coded, technical statements about the management of the debate were not taken into consideration.
6. By the raising a 'blue card', MEPs indicate they would like to ask a question of another MEP speaking in the session. If both the speaker and the President agree, then the MEP will have half a minute to pose the question (European Parliament 2019).
7. A similar case arose during the seventh parliamentary term (2009–2014), in which the EP unsuccessfully argued in favour of a responsibility-sharing mechanism in debates related to the CEAS (Kaufmann 2021).
8. On 2 June 2018, before the Italian local elections, the minister of the interior, Matteo Salvini, joined the campaign in Vicenza to support the Northern League candidate for mayor. He said that 'pacchia', translated as a godsend, for irregular migrants is over (la Repubblica 2018). Thus, Salvini strengthened stereotypes about migrants, who, according to him, benefit from the Italian 'liberal' migration policies and social system.

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## Appendix

**Table A1:** MEPs from the sample and their political group and national party affiliation.

Political groups	National parties
European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) N = 6	<b>Italy:</b> The Other Europe <b>Portugal:</b> Portuguese Communist Party N = 2 <b>Spain:</b> Podemos; United Left <b>United Kingdom:</b> Sinn Fein
Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/ EFA) N = 11	<b>Belgium:</b> Confederate Ecologists for the Organisation of Original Struggles (Ecolo); Green N = 2 <b>France:</b> Europe Ecology – The Greens <b>Germany:</b> Alliance 90/The Greens <b>Italy:</b> Non-attached N = 2 <b>Spain:</b> Galician Nationalist Bloc (BNG); Greens Equo; Initiative for Catalonia Greens; Republican Left of Catalonia
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) N = 26	<b>Austria:</b> Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) <b>Belgium:</b> Flemish Socialist Party <b>Germany:</b> Social Democratic Party of Germany <b>Hungary:</b> Democratic Coalition <b>Italy:</b> Article One; Democratic Party N = 5; Possible N = 2 <b>Malta:</b> Labour Party, PL N = 4 <b>Portugal:</b> Socialist Party N = 2 <b>Spain:</b> Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) N = 4 <b>United Kingdom:</b> Labour Party N = 4
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) N = 4	<b>Bulgaria:</b> Movement for Rights and Freedoms <b>Spain:</b> Citizens – Party of the Citizenry; Non-attached N = 2
European People's Party (EPP) N = 22	<b>Belgium:</b> Christian Democratic and Flemish <b>Bulgaria:</b> Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria <b>Croatia:</b> Non-attached <b>Finland:</b> National Coalition Party (NCP) N = 2 <b>Germany:</b> Christian Democratic Union of Germany <b>Greece:</b> New Democracy <b>Hungary:</b> Fidesz N = 3 <b>Italy:</b> Forza Italia N = 3; Popular Alternative <b>Malta:</b> Nationalist Party N = 2 <b>The Netherlands:</b> Christian Democratic Appeal <b>Portugal:</b> Social Democratic Party N = 3 <b>Spain:</b> People's Party (PP) N = 2
European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) N = 7	<b>Greece:</b> Greece, Another Path N = 4 <b>Sweden:</b> Sweden Democrats <b>Italy:</b> Conservatives and Reformists <b>Croatia:</b> Croatian Conservative Party
Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) N = 10	<b>France:</b> Patriots <b>Italy:</b> Five-Star Movement (M5S) N = 4 <b>Sweden:</b> Sweden Democrats <b>United Kingdom:</b> Brexit Party; United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) N = 3
Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) N = 3	<b>France:</b> National Rally N = 2
Non-attached MEPs (NI) N = 5	<b>Italy:</b> Northern League <b>Hungary:</b> Movement for a Better Hungary <b>Greece:</b> Communist Party of Greece; Non-attached; Popular Association – Golden Dawn N = 2



**Table A2:** Research population.

Title of the debate	Date	Presence in the analytical file	Type of procedure
1. Interoperability between EU information systems in the field of police and judicial cooperation, asylum and migration – Interoperability between EU information systems in the field of borders and visa (debate)	27.03.2019		COD – Ordinary legislative procedure
2. Asylum and Migration Fund (debate)	12.03.2019	Yes	COD – Ordinary legislative procedure
3. Reform of the EU asylum and migration policy in light of the continued humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean and Africa (debate)	15.01.2019		RSP – Resolutions on topical subjects Rules of Procedure EP 132-p2
4. Situation of migrants at the EU border in Bosnia and Herzegovina (debate)	13.12.2018		RSP – Resolutions on topical subjects Rules of Procedure EP 132-p2
5. The preparation of the Marrakech Intergovernmental Conference of 10–11 December on the UN Global compact for Migration (debate)	29.11.2018		RSP – Resolutions on topical subjects Rules of Procedure EP 132-p2
6. EU Member States support for the UN Global compact for migration (debate)	13.11.2018		RSP – Resolutions on topical subjects Rules of Procedure EP 132-p2
7. Discharge 2016: European Asylum Support Office (EASO) (debate)	23.10.2018	Yes	DEC – Discharge procedure
8. Humanitarian emergency in the Mediterranean: supporting local and regional authorities (debate)	03.10.2018		RSP – Resolutions on topical subjects Rules of Procedure EP 132-p2
9. The emergency situation in Libya and the Mediterranean (debate)	11.09.2018		RSP – Resolutions on topical subjects Rules of Procedure EP 132-p2
10. Humanitarian emergencies in the Mediterranean and solidarity in the EU (debate)	13.06.2018	Yes	RSP – Resolutions on topical subjects Rules of Procedure EP 132-p2
11. Protection of children in migration (debate)	02.05.2018		RSP – Resolutions on topical subjects Rules of Procedure EP 136-p5
12. Progress on UN Global compacts for safe, orderly and regular migration and on refugees (debate)	17.04.2018		RSP – Resolutions on topical subjects Rules of Procedure EP 132-p2