

# A 'refugee crisis' unfolding: 'Real' events and their interpretation in media and political debates

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Abstract

This paper offers a comparative overview of the case studies included in this Special Issue with the aim of providing a narrative of how the refugee emergency in Europe has unfolded during the period 2014-2016. I look at the 'real' events as they happened, identify which events were taken up in the different national political scenes and media landscape as highly relevant, and then identify on the basis of a meta-analysis of the findings of the different papers, the main interpretative frames used to make sense of the refugee emergency. This meta-analysis allows me also to relate the discourses with the actual policies adopted or decisions taken with a view to addressing the emergency. The paper focuses on contrasted discourses, how they are politicised in different countries and how they are eventually brought together adopting a frame of 'reason'/rationalisation that reconciles solidarity with public order.

## **A 'refugee crisis' unfolding: 'Real' events and their interpretation in media and political debates**

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### **1. Introduction**

The aim of this special issue has been to investigate how the massive asylum seeking and migrant flows of 2014-2016 has been covered and debated in different European countries more or less directly involved in managing the refugee emergency, and even in countries that hardly received any refugees such as Britain or Poland. Contributions to this special issue have not been designed in a strictly comparative way but have rather focused on the periods and events that were of particular significance in each country. For instance, for South-Eastern and Central Eastern European countries the closure of the Hungarian border on 15 September 2015 was a major tipping point, while for Italy the shipwrecks outside Sicily on 12 and 18 April 2015 when more than 800 people on board of that ship lost their lives was a terrible experience. For Greece a crisis event was the closure of the Balkan route on 18 February 2016 and the debate over excluding Greece from Schengen, which was largely discussed during that period. We have focused on a variety of media, including the press, TV but also social media – particularly Twitter – and speeches/programmes of political leaders and political parties. Our aim has been to precisely analyse how the mediatisation and the politicisation of the 'refugee crisis' have been closely intertwined and how they have unfolded in each of the countries under study.

The special issue has started from the premise that there is an interactive relationship between specific events that take place and their coverage and de-/re-construction through media and political discourse. In other words there is an interactive link between factual events and related representations and speech events. Thus we covered the immediate arrival and transit countries at

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the southern and south-eastern corner of Europe, notably Greece and Italy, as well as the transit countries along the Balkan route, notably Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia. In Central Europe we have included Poland as the most extreme case of a country where the crisis was a matter of heated debates despite no actual lived experience thereof (hardly any immigrants or refugees entered the Polish territory). We also looked at Austria, one of the major recipients of asylum seekers heading north where a culture of welcoming supported by civil society and left wing parties shifted to an attitude of exclusion after specific events in the fall and winter of 2015. The study is complemented by an analysis of (social) media and political discourses in Germany and Sweden, two of the major final destination countries (together with Austria) in northern Europe, and also the UK – a reluctant host of a few thousands of refugees. The discourses (re-)contextualise and represent these events in a variety of ways. Attention is paid in this paper to check whether some crisis events had a wider, transnational resonance and provoked shifts in coverage and/or political arguments such as, for instance, was hypothesised with regard to the tragic death of little Aylan Kurdi, his brother and their mother who drowned outside the Turkish coast on 5 September 2015 seeking to cross to Greece.

The papers included in this special issue share a critical discourse analytic perspective which shows how different events have been represented by different media in different countries, using sometimes opposed strategies of legitimation while calling to the same values. Thus, for some, compassion and solidarity involves keeping the refugees in Syria and its neighbourhood with adequate care and money, so as to prevent them from losing their lives on their way to Europe while for others it means providing them sanctuary in the EU. In some countries their earlier experiences of seeking refuge from civil war or ethnic violence symbolised their duty to help the people fleeing the Syrian conflict, while in other countries these historical experiences were used precisely to highlight differences and reject responsibility. National discourses were internally diversified as different political parties and civil society actors adopted opposed viewpoints. Naturally a common element that surfaces in the papers included in this Special Issue is the relevance of domestic

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politics, upcoming national or regional elections and the Left and Right wing dimension as well as the ways right-wing populist and radical right parties instrumentalised this situation (e.g. Wodak 2015).

My aim in this comparative overview is to pull these different threads together and to provide a narrative of how the crisis has unfolded – the ‘real’ events as they happened, identify which events were taken up in the different national political scenes and media landscape as highly relevant, and then identify on the basis of a meta-analysis of the findings of the different papers, the main interpretative frames used to make sense of the refugee emergency. Such meta-analysis is necessary as I do not have access to the primary data that are in different languages, and of different discourse genres. This meta-analysis allows me also to relate the discourses with the actual policies adopted or decisions taken with a view to addressing the emergency.

A note of style is in order here – I am using interchangeably the terms ‘refugee crisis’ and ‘refugee emergency’ to speak of the massive asylum seeker and irregular migration flows that Europe has witnessed during the period 2014-2016. I realise that the term refugee crisis is contested by many civil society actors but it allows us to refer to this set of events in a concise way. In addition it is my view that this was a multiple ‘crisis’: a crisis in terms of unprecedented volume and pace of refugee and migrant flows but also a crisis in terms of the receiving countries’ asylum reception policies. A crisis for EU politics and policies as it brought to the fore the divergent views of different member states. Last but not least, it was a positive ‘crisis’ to the extent that it triggered a dramatic wave of solidarity and voluntary help by citizens and non-governmental organisations and later a dramatic rise of suspicion and ‘asylum panic’ (for a critical discussion on the policy responses see: Triandafyllidou & Mantanika, 2017).

The section that follows offers an overview of the flows and main events during the period analysed, notably between early 2015 and mid 2016. Section three turns to the comparative analysis

of the discourses. Last but not least the final section highlights how the politicisation and mediatisation of crisis events in Europe today is taking a new turn.

## **2. A Crisis Unfolding**

According to UNHCR data, there were 1,015,018 arrivals by sea to Europe through the Mediterranean, during 2015, with 61 per cent originating the journey from the world's top-refugee producing countries, notably Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan. Most of these arrivals were recorded at the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea – at the Greek-Turkish border (Eastern Mediterranean route), with a smaller number at the Italian coasts (in Sicily and Lampedusa, the (Central Mediterranean route).

As the situation in Syria and the neighbourhood has been deteriorating since 2013 and the emergence of the ISIS, refugee flows towards Europe started increasing dramatically not only to neighbouring countries in the region and Turkey but also via Turkey to Greece and Italy seeking to travel further north to other European countries. At the same time as conflict and violence persisted in places like Somalia, Sudan, Eritrea, and Yemen, as well as Nigeria, flows from both East and West Africa increased as well. The event that marked a new period in the Mediterranean refugee emergency was a deadly shipwreck with over 250 victims south of Lampedusa in September 2013. Following such massive loss of human lives, the Italian government decided to implement a big Search and Rescue operation, labelled Mare Nostrum, which involved sending military ships to patrol near Libya with the aim of saving small boats in distress. Thus, the year 2014 turned out to be a crisis year for Italy with significant irregular migration and asylum seeking flows via Libya (and a total number of arrivals standing at 170,000). The opposition parties accused the Italian government for creating a call effect through the Mare Nostrum operation, as migrant smugglers hurried to overload unworthy dinghies with tens or hundreds of people, reassuring them that once at sea they call the international emergency number and would soon be rescued by the Italian navy.

**Figure 1 Here**

**Figure 2 Here**

In the fall 2014, Italy sought EU solidarity to cover for the costs of Mare Nostrum (which amounted to 11 million Euro per month), and hence a decision was taken at EU level to downsize and transform it into a European operation named Triton, whose budget and mandate were however significantly narrower. Migration and asylum seeking pressures across the Central and Eastern Mediterranean continued, particularly from Syria, leading to a change in smuggling strategies from then onwards. Old large commercial vessels were loaded outside the port of Mersin in South-Western Turkey and sailed all the way to southern Italy. This trend lasted for a few months in late 2014/early 2015 while at the same time Greece experienced also a notable increase in flows, mostly of Syrians, from Turkey to the Aegean islands.

In spring 2015 it became apparent that a massive asylum seeking and perhaps also irregular migration emergency was developing as the pathways re-activated by Syrians from Turkey to Greece were increasingly travelled also by Iraqis and Afghans. Pressures along the Libya – Italy route continued leading to yet another massive shipwreck with over 800 people dying on 21<sup>st</sup> April 2015. This event prompted the European Council for urgent action which led to the adoption of Operation Sophia, aimed at destroying smuggling networks and particularly vessels, including possibly also interventions in Libyan territory. The European Commission also imposed emergency relocation quotas for distributing asylum seekers from the frontline countries (Greece, Italy and Hungary) to all the member states.

Pressure and tensions kept rising in late spring as flows unfolded: several hundreds of persons, mostly families including young children and women, crossed from Turkey to the Greek islands each day during the summer of 2015. At the same time a formerly used but little travelled smuggling route from Turkey via the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Serbia and Hungary to Austria and Germany was activated. A true Balkan path was created as people took the train or bus or simply walked through the Balkans crossing borders and reaching Austria, or

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Germany while several headed towards Sweden – a country with at least until then a particularly welcoming policy to Syrian asylum seekers (see Krzyżanowski & Rheindorf; and Wodak, this Special Issue).

As both EU institutions and national governments were taken aback by these developments, flows continued to grow, leading to intensive discussions at national and EU level on how to manage this ‘refugee crisis’. Two tragic events marked the late summer of 2015. The discovery of a truck on an Austrian motorway on 28 August 2015 with the decomposing bodies of 71 people including four children, and the death of a young Syrian Kurdish boy, Aylan Kurdi, his brother and their mother in their attempt to cross from Turkey to Greece. The picture of the body of little Aylan washed out on the Turkish coast was posted in the social media, and became viral in a matter of hours. It was republished in mainstream press and led to a huge wave of empathy and solidarity with the plight of Syrian refugees.

The famous political statement of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel ‘*Wir schaffen das*’ (we can do this) declared on 31<sup>st</sup> August 2015, referring to Germany’s capacity and ability to receive high numbers of Syrians seeking asylum in the country marked an important point in European solidarity. The welcome rhetoric was adopted also by the then Chancellor of Austria Werner Faymann. The EU institutions followed suit increasing the 60,000 relocation quotas decided in May 2015 (amidst by then already usual strong contestations by Central Eastern European member states) to 120,000. However, the Hungarian government decided to stop the transit of asylum seeking flows through the country and closed its border on 15 September 2015. Within a single week (15-22 Sep 2015), it also built a 175-km long fence of barbed wire to seal off its border with Serbia.

This caused public outcry among most member states, particularly in the west and south, while it also diverted the refugee flows to Croatia and Slovenia which were suddenly confronted like FYROM and Greece to massive transit flows. The main destinations however remained the

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same, notably Austria and Germany. The media in different countries reported strong scenes of solidarity and empathy with the people on the move, particularly at train stations in Munich and Vienna. The pressure of the huge flows was of course deeply felt in the Aegean islands where the number of people transiting reached extraordinary proportions in September, October and even November 2015 despite inclement weather. The island of Mytilene, one of the main points of entry, received each day between three and five thousand people a day during that period. In mainland Greece too though citizens showed solidarity and there was a huge mobilisation of volunteers and donations of food, clothing, toys and so on.

During the same period the first EU Turkey joint action statement was published which requires from Turkey better controls at its side of the Greek Turkish sea border with a view to limiting the flows while the European Commission promised to contribute 1 billion Euro to help Turkey bear the costs of its hosting of already more than 2 million of Syrian asylum seekers. Turkey asked for three billion Euros and the European Commission was inclined to give such a high amount provided the Turkish government limited the flows. The joint statement was issued on 15 October 2015, but not much happened on the ground.

### **Figure 3 Here**

It soon became obvious though that both national governments and EU leaders started perceiving the asylum seeking and irregular migration flows as unsustainable. Balkan countries, both those which are members of the EU like Croatia and Slovenia and those who are not notably FYROM and Serbia, started showing signs of intolerance, Hungary maintained its starkly anti-refugee position and government rhetoric, while Austria and Sweden started reconsidering their welcoming policies. This led to the tightening of rules for Syrian asylum seekers in Sweden on 24 November 2015 and to discussions about limiting the daily flows at the Slovenian Austrian border and putting an overall cap to the asylum seeking applications that Austria would admit (see



Rheindorf & Wodak, this issue). Despite criticisms by other member states, Austria went on to put a cap to asylum seeking applications for 2016 that would be not more than 37,500.

Another important EU policy development during spring 2015 was the launch of the “hotspot approach”<sup>1</sup> established both in Greece and Italy. This was introduced by the EU Commission in its proposal for a European Agenda on Migration<sup>2</sup> and can be summarised as identification, registration, and fingerprinting of incoming migrants as procedures that take place in specific camps at the borders. In Greece, there are five hotspots operating on the islands to screen and channel newcomers to the adequate procedures. In Italy, there are four hotspots operating in the area of Sicily and southern Italy. However, the ‘opening of the Balkan route’ in fall 2015 limited their role to simple registration centres that would allow people to move to Athens and the Greek mainland and continue their journey across the Greek-FYROM border.

### **Figure 4 Here**

As flows continued unabated despite the harsh winter weather, Austria decided to close its borders with Slovenia and limit the asylum seeking flow (for detail, see: Rheindorf & Wodak, and Vezovnik in this issue). All countries along the Balkan route followed suit in closing their borders and thus refugees were stranded in Greece, many of them stopped at the Greek Northern land border with FYROM, Eidomeni.

The sealing of the Balkan route came about in February 2016, after a regional agreement among police authorities of a coalition of EU member-states and non-EU countries. At the meeting held in Zagreb, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of February 2016, and as a follow-up to the meeting held in Skopje, on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2016, the Heads of Police Services of the Republic of Austria, the Republic of Slovenia, the Republic of Croatia, the Republic of Serbia, and the Republic of Macedonia agreed that the migration flow along the Western Balkans route has to be reduced to the greatest possible extent. The agreement mainly affected the Greek-FYROM crossing point. FYROM authorities had already started allowing passage to only specific nationalities notably those judged more likely to be

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asylum seekers (Syrians, Iraqis, Afghans) in late January. In late February all people on the move were blocked at the Eidomeni border crossing and the Balkan route was interrupted. Soon after, and as flows from Turkey to Greece diminished gradually, the EU and particularly Germany and Chancellor Merkel undertook intensive negotiations with Turkey with a view to limiting the flows while still at the Turkish coast preventing people from crossing to Greece. On 19 March 2016 the EU-Turkey Agreement came into force blocking the crossing of asylum seekers and irregular migrants at the Turkish coast – all people arriving in Greece after that date were to be returned to Turkey. During this period between early February and late March, there were also intensive discussions on whether one ‘solution’ helping to stop the flows towards northern and western Europe would be to expel Greece from the Schengen area.

The closure of the Balkan route and the EU-Turkey agreement reduced the Turkey-Greece flows to a handful of people per day compared to the thousands of the previous months. Those who arrived after 19 March have been kept on the islands while, however, very few have been returned to Turkey, as Greek asylum committees found their asylum claims admissible (thus indirectly not recognising Turkey as a safe country for these people) and are currently awaiting for their cases to be processed by the Greek asylum system. Flows from Italy to Turkey continued however unabated during 2016, with total arrivals standing at 180,000 for 2016, and approx. 5,000 by early March 2017. In September 2016 an EU-Afghanistan conference was held in Brussels with a view to ensuring the latter country’s cooperation in admitting Afghan citizens whose asylum application had been rejected. Currently there is discussion at EU level about an EU-Libya agreement amidst revelations of tragic conditions at Libyan militias’ impromptu jails where migrants from Sub Saharan Africa are held upon the payment of ransom by their families back home or made to work under slave-like conditions to pay for their liberation.

## **2. Debating the Crisis**

The papers included in this Special Issue cover media and political discourses that refer to 2015-2016. As the above short overview of the migrant/refugee flows' evolution and related policy developments has shown, there were several turning points where actions and discourses of both national and EU authorities were influenced by the massive and (then) continuing character of the flows and the lack of effective means to tame them. These responses in policy and political actions soon entailed various subsequent "discursive shifts" (Krzyżanowski, 2013; Krzyżanowski in this Special Issue) and policy changes, and effectively led to policies/actions becoming legitimised by political and mediated discourses (Zhao & Djonov, 2017).

There was clearly a shift from seeking to manage and to channel the flows distributing responsibility through quotas in spring and fall of 2015, to the construction of the refugee flows as an effective emergency, a crisis that called for more drastic measures. These policy developments were obviously in an interactive relationship with developing media and political discourses as well as civil society mobilisations around the refugee crisis. Contributions to this special issue focus on the mediatisation of the refugee flows, notably the representation of the flows and of the specific events that took place in the summer, fall and winter 2015 and in early 2016) in the media – both the traditional mass media (Press, television) and social media (notably Twitter) which are used by parties and governments as direct channels for defending their decisions. They also however examine the politicisation of the issue, notably the way in which the refugee flows and the related policy challenges have been intertwined with national party-political discourses and their internal political competition in each country. We clearly see these different factors as inter-related in the (re)production of the political and media discourse on the refugee emergency.

Media and political debates as (re)produced in media, in speeches, in Twitter posts, were nationally and regionally contextualised in relation to the positioning of each country as a frontline or final destination, as directly or peripherally involved; and also historically and politically contextualised in terms of past experiences of seeking or offering refuge and hosting migrants (or

lack thereof), and in relation to current challenges including Euro-scepticism (see contributions to this Special Issue).

The landscape thus of the overall politicisation and mediatisation of the crisis has been complex and with overlapping contextualisations and intertextualisations. My aim in this concluding paper is to highlight how the actual flow of events compares with the importance each event is given in the different national media and political landscapes, and also to identify the common interpretive frames that are shared across the countries under study.

### **2.1 Turning points of a shared European story-line**

Contributions in this Special Issue cover different sections of the wider period during which the refugee emergency has been unfolding, notably between the early 2015 and the Spring 2016, while most papers concentrate on the peak times in the period between July 2015 and January 2016. Naturally the choice of the specific periods to be covered pertains to the authors and their contextual judgement on which was a really crucial period during which the politicisation and mediatisation strategies adopted by political leaders and the media can be analysed and when public discourse accelerated (see Table 1 for an overview).

#### **Table 1 Here**

Connecting the methodological choices of contributors to this Special Issue to the actual evolution of events (see our overview in the previous section) allows us to identify how each set of national media and/or national political leaders ‘hooked’ upon a specific event that is nationally relevant, along a longer shared story-line of the refugee emergency. As earlier research has shown, international crisis events are debated by national media in different ways that resonate with national discourses while also intertwining with common European discursive elements (Triandafyllidou, Wodak, & Krzyzanowski, 2009).

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We can re-tell the story-line of the refugee emergency through the nationally important events that mark this one year period from April 2015 till March 2016: The first event that marks the beginning of the crisis is the massive shipwreck once again south of Lampedusa in April 2015 – an event that has naturally marked the highpoint in Italian discourse and which was chosen by the Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi to elaborate on Italy's role and future policies in his speech in Parliament on 22 April 2015.

The second major event is the death of the little boy Aylan Kurdi in the crossing from Turkey to Greece in early September 2015. Effectively, the relevant event is not the drowning of the little child but rather the diffusion through the social and traditional media of his picture which came to symbolise the tragedy of the Syrian people in particular but also more widely of those fleeing war seeking refuge to Europe. The picture highlighted how the victims were innocent (children) and defenceless humans. It showed them as unable to influence their own fate and thus in thrall to 'forces' of, on the one hand, traffickers and smugglers in the process of getting to Europe and, on the other, (mainly national yet largely uncoordinated) political actions steering the process upon their arrival.

The third main event which is widely shared as a landmark, a turning point for the countries along the Balkan route, is the erection of a fence at the Hungarian-Serbian border on 15 September 2015 – for the first time fences and barbed wire enter the representation of the refugee crisis. This along with the actual 'march' of the refugees across the Balkans is the main event that organises the politicisation of the refugee crisis in Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia and Poland.

The fourth event, which is however closely related to the closure of the Hungarian Serbian border is the massive welcome of refugees by many citizens who meet them up at the train stations of Munich and Vienna in September and October 2015, offering clothes, toys, food, and hospitality. This is a major event that organises the coverage in Austria and Germany even if later the discourse shifts away from hospitality and openness.

The fifth event is the Cologne incidents on New Year's Eve: a number of young women celebrating New Year's Eve in the main Cologne square in Germany are assaulted by groups of young men looking foreign (dark skin, dark hair, looking 'Arab') who steal their cell phones and wallets and also abuse them. While there is no confirmation that the perpetrators are asylum seekers, the first testimonies and media representations signal that some of them could be part of the recent arrivals. These events on New Year's Eve in Cologne signal a turning point – a re-contextualisation of the refugee emergency in terms of body politics, the emergence of a 'sexual nationalism' where the nation, the homeland, or Europe is represented as a young and innocent woman assaulted by these foreign, evil men.

The Cologne incidents are tightly linked to the eventual closure of the Austrian borders and subsequent closure of the Balkan route – which both have important resonances with the Austrian and German debates. They become however important for Greece too as they not only create an additional emergency – people are stranded in Greece, just before the Greek-FYROM border in the North but force also Greece to take a stance. And while the Greek government refuses to close its border with Turkey upholding its obligation to offer asylum, it has to come to terms with the dilemma and the pressure, simultaneously being threatened with expulsion from the Schengen treaty. These two related events, the closure of the Austrian borders and the subsequent complete closure of the Balkan route become thus matters that represent more widely the belonging to the European Union.

The papers in this Special Issue highlight how these shared important events are re-interpreted within each national public sphere with a view of defining what is really at stake for each country and how it should be dealt with. Having reviewed the analysis provided in each paper, the section below identifies on the basis of meta-analysis of the specific findings on each country the two main interpretive frames (Snow et al. 1986; Triandafyllidou & Fotiou, 1998; Verloo, 2005) that define in the different countries what is at stake and what should be done about it. While the

different papers adopt different methodologies and tools for analysis, they all belong to the wider critical discourse analysis perspective and thus allow us to use their findings for a critical analysis of relevant interpretive frames.

## **2.2 Interpretative frames: what is at stake and what should be done about it**

While usually frame analysis (Snow et al. 1986; Verloo, 2005) is adopted on the basis of the primary media or other (e.g. policy) textual materials, I am proposing here to use it for the meta-analysis of the findings of the specific case studies included in this volume. The reason is that while the coverage offered is comprehensive and wide, it would be impossible to analyse the primary materials through a common dataset or coding scheme and method given the fact that they exist in different languages and cover different genres of discourse (from Twitter messages to long parliamentary speeches). However, there are some findings that clearly emerge in terms of what is at stake, what is the suggested course of action to address the issue and who is to blame.

As the paper by Vollmer on Germany aptly epitomises in this special issue, the '*refugee emergency*' is defined by a representation of people on the move. The flows that are massive and desperate. References to small boats unworthy of sailing at high seas, images of people being rescued from the sea but also of dead corpses, become typical images and references that construct the emergency. As Colombo with her paper on Italy rightly stresses in this special issue, what has been an emergency for already a couple of years is transformed into a crisis, both at the discursive level but also at the level of factual information (thus proving that it 'becomes' crisis only once sufficient conditions of both politicisation and mediatisation are in place, see Introduction to this Special Issue). The representation of the refugee emergency soon moves on and from dinghies passes to people marching, walking across borders, travelling from Greece, through FYROM, Serbia and Hungary (or later through Serbia to Slovenia) and moving on to Austria and Germany, with their feet. Occasionally also by train and bus taking routes that were hitherto forgotten local

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connections among petty traders or families in the region – routes that had no major economic or political significance in the post-1989 period.

Alongside these actual effects of hundreds of thousands of people moving across the Turkey-Greece corridor and the Balkan route up west and north, the emergency is defined also by a legal fact: the Dublin Regulation that establishes the first safe country principle (asylum applications must be treated at the first safe country where the person arrives, in this case it would have been Greece) is de facto interrupted. Governments and border guards only acknowledge this exceptional situation. They do not seem to fight against it even if several measures are taken at the EU level already since spring 2015 in the effort to manage the mounting flows of asylum seekers from the Middle East and elsewhere. These two sets of events – an actual event of people travelling by boat and on foot, and the legal ‘events’ – the disruption of border controls, the de facto interruption of the Dublin regulation and also the disruption of the Schengen area regulations which foresee that controls are strict at the external EU borders as people then enter a no-internal-border zone set the scene for the refugee emergency and make it into a common, Europe-wide public issue. It is worth noting that parallel international organisations like the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) step in in producing knowledge on the crisis. The IOM establishes a new data centre in Berlin, the GDAC-IOM, with the main aim of assembling and producing data on all migration and refugee crisis but particularly on what is labelled ‘the Mediterranean crisis.’ Thus the crisis comes into being also at the level of governance.

The challenge is high for the frontline countries like Greece and Italy but also for the transit countries in the Balkans and the final destination countries particularly Austria, Germany and Sweden that start receiving an extraordinary number of people applying for asylum in their territory. Two competing interpretive frames emerge to discuss the emergency: the moralisation frame and the threat frame.

*Moral Responsibility/Solidarity vs Threat/Exclusion*



The first is a moralising frame which puts the responsibility of the flows to wars, conflict, and violence in the regions of origin. The people moving are seen as victims, they are almost represented as deprived of agency. It is the flow that moves (see the paper by Vezovnik on the Slovenian media coverage, in this special issue) and is directed north, not the single individuals. Asylum seekers are personified only to present their tragic plight. Responsibility, if any, is attributed to the human smugglers who put people in unworthy dinghies, crammed together and send them off taking advantage of their desperation to make their criminal profit. At the same time little blame is put on European (national and EU) politics whose indecisiveness in responding to the ‘crisis’ situation should be largely perceived as one of key foundations for the refugee plight.

This frame emphasises European values through different strategies of recontextualization. Italy’s Prime Minister makes reference to Christian solidarity. He directly quotes: I knocked at your door and you welcomed me, while also making reference to the very statements of Pope Francis (see Colombo in this Special Issue). Solidarity is present in most countries as a higher moral ground, an obligation of Europe to stand true to its humanitarian values of providing protection to those persecuted, for showing its humanity.

The moral values frame takes a different twist in each country – thus in Greece the left wing Prime Minister emphasises through his Twitter messages and speech in Parliament that the country remains true to the European ideals despite criticisms and despite the high costs. The same is true for the Social Democrat parties in Sweden and Austria which both during fall 2015 upkeep this view of solidarity with refugees. In Germany the discourse is inspired by empathy towards the asylum seekers. In these countries references to values are used to represent Europe as standing together in front of a common challenge. They are what makes Europe both united in diversity and distinct.

By contrast, in Croatia and Serbia (see: Sicurella in this Special Issue) – the most recent EU member state and a country that does not yet belong to the EU – public intellectuals accuse

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‘Europe’ (western, northern Europe, the EU institutions) for not upholding these European values of humanitarianism. They assert that these values are in crisis in Europe but not in their own countries. Thus values also become a criterion of European-ness, turning the argument on its head.

In Austria and in Germany the frame is further reinforced by notions of deservingness; territorial borders are thus contextualised as morality borders too. These people deserve protection because they are fleeing war. This framing is replicated in Poland albeit in a clearly negative tone: the asylum seekers are not deserving of solidarity and protection because they are bogus refugees, in reality they are economic migrants. Interestingly it is only public intellectuals as analysed in the paper on Croatia and Serbia that offer a reflection on World War II, persecution and providing refuge – arguing that Europe must not forget and must uphold its solidarity and humanitarianism values.

The second interpretive frame identified across media and political speeches in the countries under study is the frame of ‘Threat’. The asylum seeker flows are like a natural disaster – they are fall upon one unexpectedly. They cannot be managed and are unpredictable. This frame is strong in Poland and Slovenia in particular but is also present in the UK and Austria as the emergency unfolds and the flows continue unabated. The ‘jungle’ in Calais as the symbol of ‘threat’, going out of control and even health risks is mobilised in the British Twitter discourses analysed by Bennett in this Special Issue.

The threat frame is a common frame mobilised often in today’s globalised and interconnected ‘risk’ society (Beck, 2001). In Poland and Slovenia specific risks for public health from unknown – now forgotten in Europe – diseases and the inability of health services to cope.

The strategy of personification (“Us” versus “Them”) is used in this frame to clearly oppose “us” – the natives, the Europeans – to “them” – the migrants, the newcomers, the non-deserving ones. In the frontline countries like Italy and Greece ‘them’ is also Europe – which has left them to deal with the emergency, without sufficient solidarity or support. In Poland, the “Us versus Them”

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strategy is adopted not only to emphasise Poles versus ‘western Europeans’ but also to juxtapose Poland from Sweden (look how they have become, they have sharia law in many provinces – because they did not protect their borders) as well as Germany (the Germans are responsible for these large migrant flows).

In conclusion, the threat frame mobilises both feelings of uncertainty and divisions within Europe. By contrast to the moralisation frame which refers to shared European values and to a common representation of us and them together, in solidarity and even empathy, the threat frame uses opposition to argue that this is a ‘zero sum’ game: what migrants / refugees ‘achieve’ comes at the expense of the natives who welcome them.

### *Rationalisation: Reconciling Solidarity with Order*

While one might expect that there are simply two competing representations of the refugee emergency that are determined by the ideology and overall left vs right positioning of the political leaders/media outlets, and by the position of each country as frontline/transit vs. final destination, what emerges from all the papers is that eventually these competing perspectives are reconciled through the frame of rationalisation.

Rationality and efficiency in managing the crisis are used as an interpretive frame to identify what the problem really is (about the refugee emergency) and what should be done about it. Thus, for instance, the Italian Prime Minister Renzi or the Austrian Chancellor Faymann refer to rationality to justify their decisions. Renzi speaks of Italians as practical people who do not reason with their stomach, or emotions but with their technical expertise in his speech to Parliament in April 2015. He uses this strategy to reconcile unlimited Christian solidarity with limited capacity to welcome and support the high number of asylum seekers arriving in the country’s shores. Faymann progressively builds his argument from one of ‘if there is not sufficient capacity to host the refugees, we will create it’ to subscribing to the argument that it is ‘irresponsible’ to accept so many people, eventually concluding in January 2016, that Austria can only accept 37,500 new asylum

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seekers per year and once this number is reached, it will close its borders. The upper limit is justified through an interpretive frame of rationality, distancing thus the debate from moral arguments about human rights while also however refusing to endorse the threat frame. In both countries concerns about retaining votes play an important part. Faymann seeks to remedy the bad results at the regional election while Renzi seeks to keep the allegiance of those voters who start worrying about Italy showing 'too much' solidarity.

In a similar vein, the Swedish Social Democrat party and its leader conclude 'we are a small country and have done enormously a lot' hence while we uphold our principles and tradition of human rights and providing asylum, we have to limit the number of people we can accept and hence we have to close our borders.

Interestingly this frame is also adopted in the UK, which has hardly received a high number of asylum seekers: An open extrovert economy does not mean that the national borders should be open. An important element in the rationalisation frame is control and order: preventing things from getting out of control, re-introducing order. Thus responsibility and order become a necessary ingredient for solidarity. Solidarity cannot be irresponsible, too idealistic, not taking into account effective constraints. Thus the rationalisation frame endorses solidarity. The rule of law and public order is necessary to defend the values of liberalism that Europe cherishes which include human rights and providing protection to those who need it.

Rationalisation provides both ex post legitimation (see: Rheindorf & Wodak this issue) and precedes the policy, pre-emptying opposition and preparing the ground for it (see: Krzyzanowski on Sweden and Colombo on Italy, in this issue). Rationality is indeed an inherent feature of western modern civilisation and thus resonates across countries and provides fertile ground for a European discourse on the refugee emergency, beyond the different positions and interests of each country. Rationalisation is an interpretive frame that avoids left wing versus right wing tensions. It thus eventually solves the big moral and political dilemma of Europe allowing political leaders and the

media to present political and policy decisions as both true to the European values of humanitarianism, solidarity, asylum but also taming the influx of newcomers that are feared to drain resources and destabilise social cohesion. Assistance must be provided but while making sure that security and order prevail and the rights of ‘natives’ are not impaired by the dynamic immigration/refugee situation.

### **3. Concluding Remarks**

This Special Issue provides for a critical review of the politicisation and mediatisation of the refugee crisis in different European countries. It brings together countries like Greece and Italy that were at the frontline of arrivals, with those countries that found themselves in the middle of the Balkan route, quite unexpectedly and dramatically, notably Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia, along with the final destination countries that bore the brunt of the emergency notably Austria, Germany and Sweden. It also includes a traditional destination of asylum seekers, notably the UK, which however has received very low number of arrivals in this period, and Poland, a central-eastern European country that was not touched by the refugee flows nor has a significant immigrant population but where a perceived and constructed refugee crisis emerged for the first time as an important political issue.

The aim of the different chapters has been to provide for a critical analysis of the politicisation and mediatisation of the refugee emergency, organising their analysis usually around important crisis events. In this paper, I have tried to juxtapose the actual unfolding of the refugee emergency over the period spring 2015 to spring 2016 – notably from the dramatic increase of the flows and the huge shipwreck in April 2015 south of Italy to the signature of the EU Turkey agreement – with the ways in which different events were signalled as important turning points in the different countries. The comparative overview suggests that while there is a common story line of events that are relevant in all countries, the selection of what is the turning point has more to do with the

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geographical and political proximity / relevance of the event for each country (e.g. the closure of the Hungarian Serbian borders for Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia, or the closure of the Austrian borders and the overall Balkan route for Greece) but also with the ways in which this event resonates with underlying national themes and historical legacies, such as notions of who we are and what are our values, what are the common European values, what is the positioning of the country in the wider European geopolitical context, and of course the left wing versus right wing positioning of the party and political leader speeches and Twitter strategies analysed.

Two contrasted interpretive frames emerge initially that clearly signal a set of divergent positions between traditional left wing and right wing political forces: thus Socialist, Social Democrat and other centre-left or left wing parties and media adopt the moralisation frame upholding notions of solidarity and providing protection despite the massive character of the flows, while right wing and far right wing politicians in particular adopt an interpretive frame of threat and risk, using this frame to create divisions within Europe and to juxtapose their nation to the asylum seekers/migrants, but also to other European countries.

However this political tension and disagreement is eventually solved by the mobilisation of the rationality interpretive frame. Both the partisans of risk and closure, and the supporters of solidarity and humanitarianism, can agree on the need for being rational, practical, and able to manage the emergency. While for those supporting the risk frame, the rationalisation frame comes in as the way to avert risks and seal off the borders – this is what it means being rational and efficient, for those supporting the morality and values frame, rationalisation means being responsible and effective. Thus taming solidarity and empathy with the notion of responsibility and order. Eventually solidarity and order are reconciled, allowing for parties and the media to argue that they were not betraying the European values but clarifying that in order to stay true to those values and implement them properly, there is a need for closure and re-establishing control and order. This interpretative

frame becomes almost super-partes, it is not politically or ideologically tainted. It becomes as the obvious, rational, responsible thing to do.

Interestingly this frame is in some countries used to prepare the ground for decisions to be taken (for Sweden, see Krzyzanowski in this Special Issue) while in other countries to justify decisions already taken (for Austria, see Rheindorf & Wodak, in this Special Issue, or the UK, see Bennett) and yet in others to accuse the government for not taking action (as in the case of the opposition leader in Greece, see Dimitrakopoulou & Boukala in this Special Issue). This is an issue that would require further research, notably on how frames may be both used to foreground decisions and ‘solutions’ while they may also be used to legitimise ex post the course of action chosen.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed overview of how the EU Parliament presents this approach, see ‘On the frontline: the hotspot approach to managing migration’, (2016). Retrieved from:

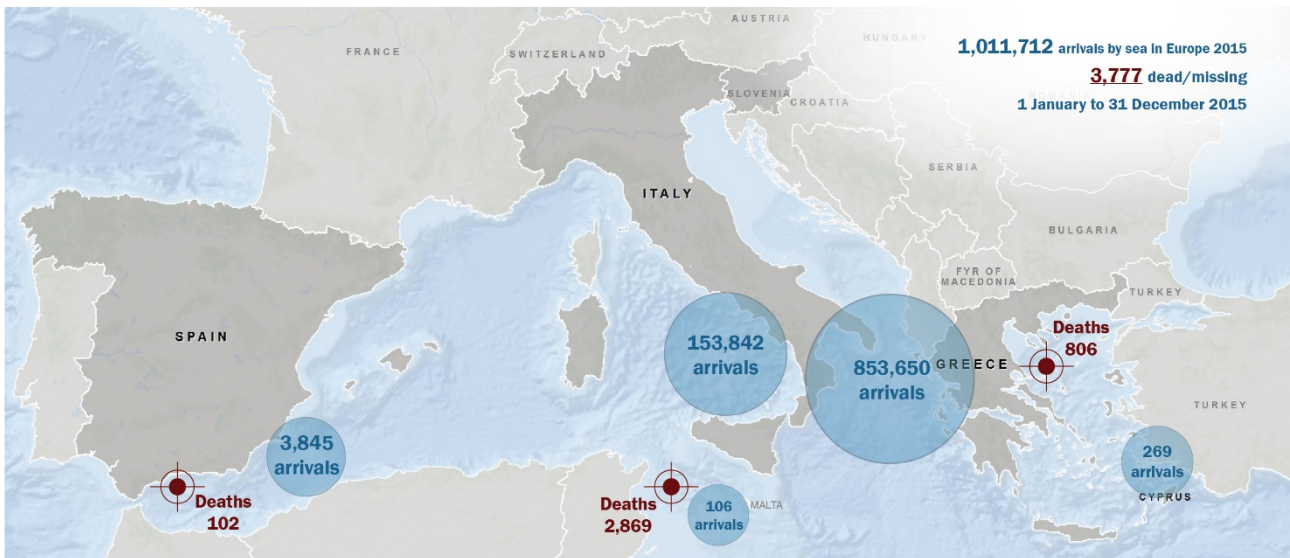
[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/556942/IPOL\\_STU\(2016\)556942\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/556942/IPOL_STU(2016)556942_EN.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Retrieved from:

[http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/communication\\_on\\_the\\_european\\_agenda\\_on\\_migration\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/communication_on_the_european_agenda_on_migration_en.pdf), consulted on 3

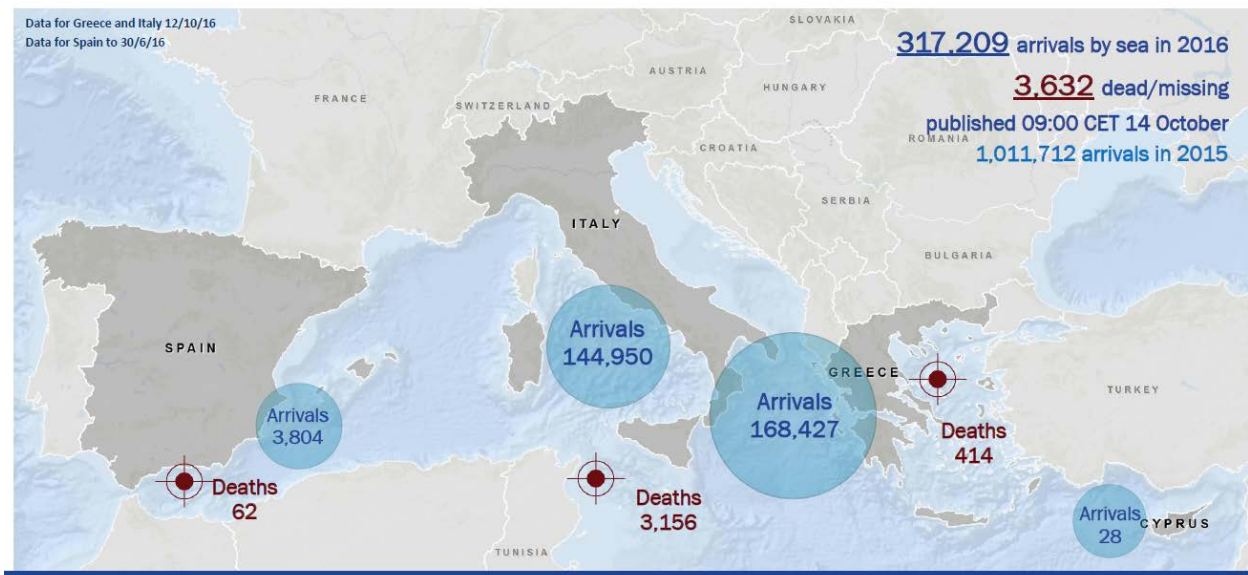
October 2016.

**Figure 1: Arrivals across the Mediterranean 2015**



Source: Source: IOM data, Missing Migrants Project, Infographics, made available upon request to IOM on 29 November 2016, <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/infographics>

**Figure 2: Arrivals across the Mediterranean 2016**



Source: IOM data, Missing Migrants Project, Infographics, published on 18 October 2016. Retrieved from: <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/infographics>

Figure 3: The Balkan route via Hungary



**Figure 4: The Balkan Route (path via Slovenia and Croatia)**



Source: European Asylum-Seeker Crisis: Scenarios, 4 November 2015, ACAPS ([www.acaps.org](http://www.acaps.org)), p.4.

**Table 1: Overview of sampling strategy and materials analysed**

Countries	Period covered	Sampling strategy	Press	TV	Twitter	Speeches
Greece	5 Feb to 20 Mar 2016	Exclusion of Gr from Schengen – crisis event	X		X	X
Italy	2014-2015, 22 Apr 2015	Wider period and crisis event: Shipwreck with 800 victims	X			X
Austria	1 Apr 2015 to 21 Jan 2016	Wider period with crisis events: Closure of Hungarian borders, High number of asylum applications, Cap for asylum applications, Closure of Austrian borders	X			
Germany	Spring 2015- Early 2016	Wider period of refugee flows	X			
United Kingdom	Three 2-week periods July, Sep 2015, Jan 2016	Crisis events: increase of flows, Aylan Kurdi, Closure of Austrian border			X	
Poland	16 Sep, 23-24 Sep, 12 Oct 2015	Crisis events: Closure of Hungarian border and decision of quotas at EU Council	X		X	X
Sweden	1 Nov-15 Dec, and 24 Nov 2015 specifically	Crisis event: tightening of asylum policy – party twitter and speech	X		X	
Serbia	1-30 Sep 2015	Crisis event: closure of Hungarian border				X
Croatia	1-30 Sep 2015	Crisis event: Closure of Hungarian border				X
Slovenia	20 Aug to 31 Dec 2015	Wider period when refugee flows cross through Slovenia		X		