

A comparative analysis of migration narratives in traditional and social media

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Abstract

Mass-mediated narratives are a crucial source to make sense of migration. Many scholars have studied the frames, themes and language of the media, especially in news about migrant and refugee arrivals. However, research comparing old and new media in different countries and journalistic sub-genres (refugee arrivals, debates on non-citizens' rights, terror attacks) and engaging with both frames and narratives was missing. This study is based on six national reports, systematising and comparing their findings. In particular, the focus is on the distribution of narratives and frames on migration in the various sub-genres and on the ingredients, actors, circumstances, strategies, and infrastructure of narrative success. The analysis is based on 2792 news stories and 1768 social media messages with the highest engagement published during the peak coverage of 17 migration-related events and uses content, discourse, and frame analysis. In addition, we collected 53 semi-structured interviews among journalists and other people involved in the events. Frames and narratives were fairly similar across countries and their resemblance is even greater in the case of terror attacks. Nevertheless, each sub-genre is characterised by a specific structure of opportunities that allows or hinders the advancement of different narratives, in a hierarchical context where not all stories and storytellers enjoy the same chances. Differences between countries are more a question of degree than substance and may be traced back, with caution, to longer-term conversations about the nation's identity and belonging.

Keywords: migration, narratives, media, media frames, refugee arrivals, non-citizens' rights, terror attacks, France, Germany, Italy, Hungary, Spain, United Kingdom, comparative

1. Introduction

1.1 Object and questions

In the contemporary world, media reports are often the only way we can make sense about remote happenings. Narratives, in particular, are the most effective vehicles through which the news media orient their audience, whether by way of news written in narrative form or reconstructed as such by the public (Bird and Dardenne 1987). As sequences of chronologically and logically related events from which humans can learn (Toolan 2001), which brings a sense of order and structure to otherwise meaningless cognitive elements, narratives convey ideas about characters and their agency, causality, and Us and Them, stirring emotions and involving moral judgement. When single news-items on a given event become a coherent cross-media and cross-platform narrative representation of a certain issue, the aforementioned features gain a far-reaching influence that affects the cognitive and emotional experience of the public. Media narratives, with their repeated situations, characters and storytelling features, are made with ingredients that are familiar to the public. They help, as Toolan, quoting White (1997), puts it “naturalise and portray as commonsensical the ideology which informs the selection of just this story, handled in just this way” (2001). This meaning-making and communicative effect is not limited to a generic ‘audience’, but structures the way a phenomenon can be discussed and dealt across the hybrid media system (Chadwick 2013), the political sphere, street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 2010) and bodies operating in civil society.

The media, however, are not alone in crafting news stories. Politicians, government representatives, public officials, and members of civil society – in their role of more or less prominent sources, depending on the ‘authority capital’ they have – can introduce narrative fragments or whole plots in news stories. Social media platforms, in turn, are constantly monitored by journalists in search of new inputs. A news story, thus, is a layered embedding of reported speech (Van Dijk 1988), whose storytellers, often engaged in a fight for ‘storytelling hegemony’, are not as manifest as those of fictionalized stories.

Media narratives on migration in six European countries are the focus of this study. In short, we deal with stories about *there, on the way* – the process of migration – and *here*, as for issues of immigrants¹ and second-generation’s rights, (non)integration in host societies, cultural diversity, or particular events involving them and their offspring. As narratives often depict a state of turbulence that is subsequently resolved (Todorov 1977), migration, mostly depicted as an ongoing crisis, fits perfectly with the logic of narrative production. The typical crisis to resolution progression, nevertheless, in the daily news, concerned as they are with ongoing events, is somehow suspended (Bell 1991). Media stories rarely provide a resolution: the crisis is often not resolved but just addressed or denounced, arousing a sense of anxiety among the public – whose sense of self is embedded in language and narrative (Taylor 1989)

¹ In the text, a wide array of labels is used to define the targets of these narratives. Given the many different situations in which people on the move or long arrived find themselves, and the political connotations of each label, each specific use could be contested. As a consequence, I took the liberty of alternating designations, hoping not to offend anyone, while I left quoted labels in their original, if translated, form.

– affecting in the long term ideas of belonging and identity. This brings about a series of questions, starting with what is defined as a crisis, who is affected and who is responsible.

Anyway, this study is not only interested in the description of the existing narratives about migration. It aims to explore *why* some narratives about migration become dominant over others and what makes them more successful, compelling, or enduring. What are the ways and the conditions under which certain contents travel across the media arena at the expense of others?

In order to do this, narratives as *entity*, that is, available stories, and as *process*, meaning their production, circulation, and transformation, must be distinguished. As regards *entities*, this report considers the main stories, the frames in which they are organized, the features that distinguish the main characters and the boundary making involved in their representation, characters' agency and roles, but also their foregrounding or backgrounding, events' reciprocal connections or disconnections, the emotions and the morals implicit in the stories, and the role that images play into them. Considering narratives as *processes*, means investigating the conditions and the politics of production and transformation of narratives and frames, the factors that open up opportunities for new narratives and the constraints that hinder their unfolding, and finally the prehistory of actual stories that emerge out of a background made of the cultural, historical, and political factors that influence these transformations.

The central focus of BRIDGES is the examination of the ingredients, circumstances, logics, strategies, and infrastructure of narrative success, in terms of pervasiveness and possible transformative impact over domains other than discourse (Garcés-Mascareñas and Pastore 2022). In order to sketch the dimensions and research questions considered, it is possible to make a distinction between:

- *Representation*. What are the dominant narratives on migration? What are their features and how do they contribute to their success? What is the impact of different topics and of journalistic practices on narrative opportunities?
- *Narrators*. Who tells the story about migration? What is the hierarchy of access to traditional and social media and what are the available strategies and opportunities, but also the constraints and barriers, for each different voice?
- *Venues*. Where do narratives emerge, with what differences between types of outlets (across political orientation or market segment) and platforms (TV, newspapers, social media)? Equally worthy of investigation, what are the flows between traditional and social media?
- *Circumstances*. When do certain narratives obtain a competitive edge and what can deviate their course? What makes events favourable or unfavourable in relation to different narratives and storytellers?

These research questions apply not only to narratives but also to frames. The concept of “frame” refers to a “central organizing idea [... that] suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue” (Gamson and Modigliani 1987, 143). In other words, a frame is an angle through which a news story becomes meaningful and it is conveyed with devices such as metaphors, catchphrases, visuals, and reasoning about causes and consequences (Gamson and Modigliani 1989). The selection and emphasis on certain attributes persuades the public to understand an issue in a particular light. In a sense, while news narratives are

basically *mise en intrigue*, the setting of a plot that dynamises reality in chains of events attributed to characters, frames can be conceived as the 'big pictures' describing the main issues resulting from these news stories. Even bigger pictures, or angles, can be described as master frames (Benford and Snow 2000; Ihlen and Nitz 2008), i.e. wider-scope frames that cluster frames into a coherent whole²

Both narratives, frames, and master frames are cues that activate cognitive schemata (such as culprit/victim, hero/villain, disaster/rescue) among the public (for frames, see Scheufele 1999). They also draw from, sometimes modify, and activate deeper symbols, myths and tropes of a given culture. Being linked to these cultural repertoires (Lamont et al. 2016, 21), narratives and frames resonate, helping individuals to make sense of the reality they experience.

The investigation of all the cycle of narrative and frame production, transformation, and reception, although limited to the issue of migration, is beyond the reach of this study. Yet the extension in time and place of the case studies considered, and the number of news stories and social media messages, allows not only to describe broad narrative and frame patterns and transformations, but also to make inferences on the factors that play a role in their shaping and circulation. Two other BRIDGES reports are dedicated to the analysis of news narratives' reception and impact in the political sphere.

1.2 Research design and methodology

In order to address the research questions sketched above, this study follows a processual perspective. It examines how narratives develop inside and across the media and social media arena adopting a case study approach, which best allows for the description and interpretation of social processes providing a context-dependent knowledge.

As the aim is that of generalising from single events, it is useful to identify types of occurrence that take place on a regular basis. In the coverage and commentary of these repeated, similar incidents, the media and individual 'storytellers' establish routines to deal with stories that are similar in topic, available sources, typical verbal reactions, recurring scripts and frames, usual constraints, stakes, and opportunities. These 'families' of news with specific sets of features will be called *journalistic sub-genres*, which accommodate the need of news-organizations to make the unpredictable predictable and show peculiar dynamics and typified stories. Sub-genres are matrixes of longer and wider narrative dissemination processes, hence qualifying as productive spots for observation.

In agreement with our project partners, we selected three relevant sub-genres: a) refugee arrivals, b) "debates on non-citizens' rights", and c) "terror attacks." Besides being types of news that have regularly punctuated the media coverage of issues directly or indirectly related to migration in European countries, these news-families are characterised by a diverse mix of features that allows for the investigation of different dynamics. These sub-genres can thus be conceived not only as different sets of conditions constraining narrative production (Table 1),

² Originally employed in research on social movements and then in media studies, the concept of master frame is reworked here to fit the proposed framework.

but as containers of specific, limited sets of repeated narratives and basic frames that nurture the public's common wisdom.

TABLE 1. Mix of features of each sub-genre

	Refugee arrivals	Debates on non-citizens' rights	Terror attacks
Frequency	Habitual	Recurring	Not frequent
Scale	Local, national, supra-national	National	National, (supra-national)
Sense of place	External or liminal	Internal, but de-territorialised	Domestic and violated
Development	Progressive, but eventful with sudden crises	Slow, with 'attention windows'	Dramatic
Profile	High, medium, low	Medium	Very high
Reporters and visual documentation	On-the-spot reporters or foreign correspondents, live footage	Political reporters, repertory footage	Reporters assigned to institutional reporting and on-the-spot, live and ceremonial footage
Relevant stakeholders and sources	Politicians, governmental bodies, NGOs, immigrants	Politicians, (immigrants') associations, social movements	Politicians, public officials, experts, (Muslims') associations

In each country involved in the analysis, and in a time range comprised between 2015 and 2021, a case study considering a relevant event for each sub-genre was identified.³ The countries are representative of long-time destinations of immigration in Western Europe, like France, Germany, and the UK, countries of more recent settlement, namely Italy and Spain, and a country with a negligible migration presence such as Hungary. The actual case studies are listed in Table 2.

We considered both news stories in traditional media and messages in social media. As for the former, we collected all the pertinent news-stories published during the peak period (or several periods, in the case of events unfolding along scattered peaks) by 41 major national (and sometimes local) newspapers and prime-time newscasts. We tried to represent different political orientations and ownership models selecting at least five media outlets per case study, depending on the characteristics of the event and the specificity of the media system in each country (see Table 3). In total, we analysed 2281 newspaper stories and 511 TV news items.

³ Since Hungary had not experienced terror attacks, the case studies for that sub-genre are 5 and not 6.

TABLE 2. Case studies

	Refugee arrivals	Debates on non-citizens' rights	Terror attacks
France	Calais and Eurotunnel crossings (2015)	Burkini controversy (2016)	Nice (2020)
Germany	Burning of Moria camp on Lesbos (2020)	Integration law (2015-2016)	Berlin Christmas market (2016)
Hungary	Camerawoman tripping refugees running away from the police (2015)	“National Consultation on Immigration and Terrorism” (2015)	
Italy	Sea Watch 3 forbidden landing to Lampedusa (2019)	Citizenship reform (2017)	Macerata (2018)
Spain	Passages in Ceuta (2021)	Poster of VOX criminalising unaccompanied minor migrants (2021)	Barcelona and Cambrils (2017)
UK	Calais and Eurotunnel crossings (2015)	“Windrush scandal” about deportation of people arrived from Caribbean countries before 1973 (2018)	Manchester Arena (2017)

TABLE 3. Media outlets

Countries	Newspapers			TVs	
	<i>Progressive, left, liberal</i>	<i>Centre, conservative</i>	<i>Right, populist</i>	<i>Public</i>	<i>Private</i>
France	La Croix	Le Monde, Nice-Matin (local), La Voix du Nord (local)	Le Figaro	France 2	TF1
Germany	Spiegel, taz, Die Zeit, Süddeutsche Zeitung	Focus, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Handelsblatt	Bild, Die Welt	ZDF, ARD	RTL, SAT1
Hungary	444	Index	Magyaridök	M1	RTL
Italy	Il Fatto quotidiano	Il Corriere della Sera	Il Giornale	TG1	TG5
Spain	El País	El Mundo, La Vanguardia (local), El Faro (local)	Libertad Digital	TVE, TV3	Antena 3
UK	The Guardian	The Times	Daily Mail	BBC	ITV

As regards social media, in each case study we considered the 100 most retweeted messages written on Twitter during the same time frame chosen for newspapers and TV. Messages were retrieved using keywords that matched the text or the hashtag (in Hungary, however, the low uptake of this platform has led researchers to work on Facebook posts). The total of the tweets and Facebook posts examined is 1768. We chose Twitter for several reasons. First, it is the platform most integrated with mainstream media, as politicians, journalists, writers, bloggers, and social media teams use Twitter to promote their views and impose them on newspapers and TV news programmes, making it one of the main backbones of the hybrid media system. Second, even if Twitter has a lower number of users than, say, Facebook, a very high proportion of them use it for news (Newman et al. 2022) and it hosts a very politically active segment, as hashtags are mobilising devices used by social movements, influencers, and politicians alike. This makes it interesting for the analysis of grassroots mobilisation and alternative points of view.

Apart from longer-term analyses of coverage and engagement, we content-analysed the selected news-items and tweets using two different coding sheets⁴. In this way, we built a database that could be used to quantify formats, genres, journalist's origin and gender, salience, engagement, topics, frames, narratives, characters, labels, types of processes, voices and their treatment, emotions, and visuals. Using the same database, we could also perform more in-depth analyses and go back to the original articles and TV-news recordings with a recursive approach.

Finally, for each case study, we collected a total of 53 semi-structured interviews among journalists and other people involved in the events or in their coverage. In order to have different and complementary roles, perspectives, and points of entry into the media arena, we tried to diversify our choice as much as possible, talking to journalists, NGO representatives, residents with a foreign background, politicians, activists, public officials, and influencers. We used a common but flexible interview outline that could be adjusted to specific interviewees and events (see Appendix for the interview outline).

The choice of a common approach and methodology, which shares the same set of categories of analysis and definitions, is aimed at singling out lines of comparison, and whenever possible at explaining analogies and differences. An additional endeavour is that of exploring the many shapes, transformations, and paths that narratives on migration may take in such a varied array of national contexts, and the common ingredients behind their success.

⁴ Retrievable at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7548168>.

2. Migration narratives, frames, and representation

Narratives about migration may range from the description of specific episodes to all-encompassing renditions of what immigration is about. In order to reduce such a variability of scale and context, a hierarchical classification will be adopted here, distinguishing - from the broader and less detailed to the narrower and more detailed - between a) sub-genres; b) master frames and frames that can be found in each sub-genre; c) main narratives characterizing frames; d) prevalent characters, agency, emotions, and cultural devices conveyed and exploited by dominant narratives.

A clarification is in order here. While the choice of sub-genres was agreed upon from the start (see introductory sections of WP3 country reports), no 'list' of frames was provided to the researchers operating in the various countries, so as to leave room for unexpected discoveries. In order to identify frames, we considered what Gamson and Modigliani (1989) named 'framing devices', such as metaphors, exemplars, catch-phrases, depictions, labels, images, headlines, leads, arguments (see also Tankard 2001; Gamson and Lasch 1983; Pan and Kosicki 1993). However, both in the identification and the description of frames, we gave a special place to narratives, as expressed with statements and accounts, since – despite being understudied in scholarship about framing devices – narratives bring order and structure to otherwise disconnected cognitive elements, conveying compelling and apparently naturalised interpretations of events. Given the inductive process adopted in frame identification in each national case study, the frames found in the texts were not always strictly comparable. The same holds for narratives. In this report, though, an attempt is made at reducing idiosyncratic classifications into manageable and clearly established categories.

As for frames, so-called *issue-specific* frames (de Vreese 2005), that is frames pertinent to specific topics or subjects, are considered here, while *generic frames* – such as the “human interest” or the “conflict” frame – which transcend issue boundaries, are not. Similarly, “strategic frames” (Cappella and Jamieson 1997), that is frames that refer to the strategies and power interests of the parties and not to the topics of discussion, are not taken into account. Our study is interested in “schemata of interpretation” (Goffman 1974, 21) that focus attention and articulate meaning, so issue-specific frames qualify as a way to keep track of the actual media coverage and of how narratives are grouped together in significant patterns. Even if the analysis of this kind of frames appears limited to the particular issue or case studied (Vliegthart and van Zoonen 2011), our approach, which grounds and distinguishes frames and master frames according to different sub-genres and takes advantage of a wide range of national contexts and case studies, allows for generalisations from specific cases to those typical configurations of topic, journalistic practices and narrative opportunities that are called here sub-genres.

As far as narratives are concerned, ways to conceive and analyse them are varied as are the many disciplines that engaged with them. In media studies, in particular, there is not a consolidated analytical framework. The approach followed here, in order to abstract from the particularity of each narrative to more manageable transversal dimensions, is to consider how characters are casted – with their roles, designations and qualifiers – the kind of processes and agency in which they are involved, and references to the shared cultural archive, such as

metaphors, archetypes, catchphrases, and myths, that inflect meaning giving narratives a tone and a ready-made interpretation.

2.1 Refugee arrivals

The six case studies considered here concern three refugee arrivals (the Calais/Eurotunnel crossings in the summer of 2015 seen both from France and the UK and “irregular arrivals” in Ceuta, Spain, in May 2021), the “tug-of-war” between Interior Minister Salvini and the captain of Sea Watch 3 Carola Rackete over her ship’s containing 53 people landing in June 2019, the destruction by a fire of the largest refugee camp in Europe, known as Moria (Greece), in September 2020, as told in the German media, and the incident of a Hungarian journalist who tripped refugees as they were running away from the police near the Serbian border in September 2015. The diversity of the stories makes for a diverse range of narratives, but only to a certain extent, as their coverage was characterised by similar frames and families of narratives.

In the news, narratives tend to focus on the impact of the incident or the reactions to it – conveying a problem definition – on causal interpretations and attributions of responsibilities, or on solutions to the problem, often providing a moral evaluation. These correspond to the framing functions distinguished by Entman (1993) and are included in Table 4. It must be noted that, in observance of the ritual of objectivity, a significant proportion of news do not convey any substantial interpretation of the problems, causes, or solutions associated with immigration, either because they are made of straight, fact-based news that do not project any specific reading or because, similarly, they present a balanced presentation of opposing arguments. News stories of this kind can give an angle to the story, for example by defining the issue as a clash between opposing sides, but this angle corresponds to a generic frame (generally called “conflict frame”) that does not say anything about how immigration is defined as an issue. As this study focuses on issue-specific, or we could say ‘interpretive’, frames, these kind of news is considered “frameless” (for a discussion, see Benson and Wood 2015).

In Table 4, frames are described with decreasing levels of abstraction, from left to right:

- In the 1st column, problem and benefit frames are distinguished. As a matter of fact, an issue may be presented as bad or good news, which is to say as a problem or a benefit, according to its perceived impact, bringing to two broad families of frames.
- In the 2nd column, master frames are considered. As realised in other studies (see for example Van Gorp 2005; Chouliaraki et al. 2017), in fact various frames tend to group together in (what are called here) master frames. The master frames we have identified, and which will sound familiar to the reader, are characterised by a particular intersection of a) the problem/benefit families mentioned above; and b) the perspective upon which moral evaluations of good and bad are provided: that of the destination society or that of refugees. The *threat* and *hero* master frames are seen as problems or benefits for society; refugees or (im)migrants hold agency and the host society is in the role of receiver of their actions. The *victim* and the *white saviour* master frames are seen instead as problems or benefits for refugees; here the host or destination society holds agency and refugees are mainly portrayed as passive subjects. As shown in the table, each master frame is associated with a specific range of emotional tones, which are the bases for moral evaluations.

- The 3rd column reports the ground on the basis of which the actual frames are developed. For example, economic threat, security threat, etc.
- In the 4th column we have the issue definition, what is impacted or is at stake, which is considered here the core of a frame. Even when a cause/responsibility or a solution to the problem is at centre stage, what is impacted is mentioned or otherwise remains implicit but can easily be inferred. The definition of what is at stake has often to do with the legitimisation of actions and statements, on the basis of which an implicit moral evaluation is provided.
- The 5th and 6th columns list narratives about root causes, responsibilities, and solutions, that is, the “reasoning devices” attributed to, or proposed for, the issue⁵. These may be very prominent in the news, especially the latter two. In particular, characters deemed responsible are sometimes protagonists, and solutions can become the main topic, and for long periods, in later stages of a “crisis”. Other times they appear as statements or narratives in a few sentences relegated into the body of the news story. In any case, it is the issue definition, what is at stake, which makes causes, responsibilities, and solutions meaningful, giving them a role or a purpose and making room for moral evaluations. In addition, while actual narratives relative to the stake, or impact (in the 4th column), being related to the specific incident, can be highly idiosyncratic – so that they are not reported and instead summarised using frames – narratives concerning root causes, responsibilities, and solutions are ‘resources’ that recur across several frames, although generally under the umbrella of a unique master frame. For example, the “poverty, war, violence, or political persecution” root-cause narrative can be used in association with several frames, but almost always inside the *victim* master frame. On the contrary, narratives about the solution promoting “foreign investment and development aid” can cross master frames and are found both in the *threat* and in the *victim* master frames. For this reasons, even if causes, responsibilities, and solutions could be considered as types of news frame – and have been, in a few other studies (Benson and Wood 2015; Kim et al. 2011) – for the sake of logical clarity they are considered here as declinations of the principal frames.

⁵ Van Gorp (2007), who introduced the term, uses a slightly different conceptualisation.

TABLE 4. Frames and narratives in “refugee crises”

	Master frames and associated emotions	Ground for issue definition	Frame (issue definition or stake)	Narratives about root causes or responsibilities	Narratives about solutions
Problem frames	Threat (problem for society) <i>fear, insecurity, uncertainty, discomfort, outrage, hostility, concern, firmness, impatience</i>	Economy	Burden on social services	Economic factors are magnets for migrants We are a “land of milk and honey” with our welfare benefits Migrants threaten standard of living Undocumented immigrants’ behave illegally Migrants are too many They are not genuine refugees but economic migrants Weak border control Smugglers infiltrate migrants Eurotunnel does not secure its sites Other countries shrug their shoulders/cynically infiltrate migrants Unpatriotic ‘do-gooders’ use migrants for their political gain Friends of migrants put national security at risk Our opponents do not care for the country and other types of victims Schengen area is a pull factor NGOs are migrant smugglers	Punishment for hiring, housing, or abetting undocumented immigrants Control of illegal work “Hostile environment” policies: deny opportunities for work, health care, education, or services Rule of law must be preserved Facilitation of returns and deportations Foreign investment and development aid Information campaigns aimed at undocumented immigrants More resources to enforce the border Territorial integrity is not negotiable More cooperation between member states Relocations Measures to limit NGOs unlawful acts More enforcement of the law
			Damage to the economy		
		Security/ sovereignty	Public order/ natural disaster		
			National security/ terrorism		
(Geo) politics	National/ EU lack of cohesion	Law	Collapse of rule of law	Health	Pandemic risks
Hybrid	Realistic management (problem for both the host society and refugees) <i>No emotions</i>	Technocracy	Rationality	Human smugglers enrich themselves by putting people in unseaworthy dinghies Foreign countries weaponise migrants Migrants deceived by governments or smugglers	We cannot welcome everybody Help preserving security and order Do not cede to their blackmailing Deport for their own good
Benefit frames	Victim/ humanitarian (problem for refugees) <i>indignation, guilt, sympathy, compassion, mourning, hopelessness, solidarity, shame, anger, sadness, shock, concern</i>	Human impact	Suffering	Cynical border control policies Europe must do something Governments do not respect international law Immigration system unnecessarily restrictive Poverty, war, violence, or political persecution Too many discussions and no action Government is racist	Provide reception Open borders More solidarity between EU member states Solve political and military conflicts in other nations Help alone or only act in concert with other EU member states?
		Law	Refugees’ rights		
		Ethics/ politics	Political duties/ EU values		
		Social justice	Racism, xenophobia, exclusion (Twitter)		
Benefit frames	Black/brown hero (benefit for society)	Not found in our corpus	Not found in our corpus	Not found in our corpus	Not found in our corpus
	White saviour (benefit for refugees)	Human impact	Brave action of white saviour	Not found in our corpus	Not found in our corpus
	<i>pride, admiration, relief</i>	Politics	People’s show of solidarity	Not found in our corpus	Not found in our corpus

a) *How frames are distributed*

Before commenting the table, it must be noted that the news media presented a wider array of frames than social media. In addition, Twitter and Facebook (in Hungary) did not introduce any new frame. At the level of a single country it happened that they brought in a minor sub-frame, always about responsibilities, and especially blame, but one that was already used by the traditional media in other countries.

Looking at the table, one can already see at first glance that problem frames are much more common than benefit frames. This has to do with the sub-genre of “irregular” arrivals, of course, but also with the news as a genre, which start from a complicating action that generally – for commercial, cultural, and practical reasons – is negative, disruptive, or dramatic. Moreover, it can also be explained by the political determination of most of these events as “crises”, both for the series of actions and inactions that led to them, and by discursive qualification on the part of the media and their sources – consider the different treatment in this respect of refugees from Ukraine. In the light of this, we should expect more benefit frames in the sub-genre of debates about non-citizens’ rights. Finally, the predominance of problem frames could have to do with the cultural hegemony of political positions that see immigration as a problem rather than a solution to other problems.

The distribution of frames and master frames varies across countries. In France and the UK, the *threat* master frame strongly dominated the representation, with a prevalence of the *damage to the economy, public order* (or “crisis”), and *security* (of the site more than for refugees) frames – with the associated emotions of concern, impatience, fear, discomfort, hostility – and a subordinate role of the *victim/humanitarian* master frame, evident in the ‘accounting’ mode of the media treatment (number of intrusions, deaths, hours waiting in traffic jams, etc.) where casualties were a figure rarely associated to an emotion. In Germany, on the contrary, maybe in part because the specific event chosen for the study (fire in Moria) did not imply people arriving ‘here’, the *victim/humanitarian* master frame soundly prevailed, with *suffering* and *need to help* (both as political responsibility and failure) frames, and the prominence of emotions such as compassion, mourning, shame, guilt, and sadness. Less prominent, but still present, was also a benefit frame, that of *solidarity*. The highly polarised political and media environments of Italy and Hungary make for yet another balance of frames. In both cases, the dominance of master frames depended dramatically on the political leaning of the media outlets considered. Pro-government newspapers and TVs followed their right-wing and nationalist government *threat* master frame, with frames about *security* (as a menace to sovereignty in Italy and about terrorism in Hungary) and (geo)political frames about treason on the part of the opposition and attack or abandonment on the part of other European countries (*national/EU lack of cohesion* frame). Opposition-friendly news-outlets, on the contrary, embraced the *victim/humanitarian* master frame, with lot of space for *suffering, political responsibility, and refugees’ rights* frames and, in Italy, a benefit frame like the *brave action of the white saviour* (Carola Rackete), which was frequent also in Spain.

b) *Hybrid frames*

Nevertheless, different frames can coexist in the same news-story and, more interestingly, can merge producing new hybrid creatures. As noted by Triandafyllidou (2018), during the so-called “refugee crisis” the moralisation (humanitarian) and threat frames were reconciled

through the frame of rationalisation, where responsibility and order become necessary ingredients for solidarity. In this frame, given the limited reception capacity, it would be irresponsible to accept so many people. Solidarity cannot be too idealistic: assistance must be provided but making sure that security and order prevail. This 'rational' approach in the management of the crisis distances the debate from moral arguments about human rights while at the same time refusing to endorse the threat frame, or at least its explicit anti-immigrant side.

It must be stressed, however, that while distancing from the threat narrative, the *rationality* frame keeps on board narratives about burden and security, which remain the taken-for-granted ground on the basis of which the technocratic argument is developed. The case of Spain in this project helps us to clarify this point. Migrants arriving in Ceuta were represented as victims and often described with pity and compassion, but the emphasis was mainly given to their "weaponisation" by the Moroccan government. Given this "aggression" – the predominant, bi-partisan, argument went – a firm response, like quick deportation, was due and welcoming would mean ceding. If the *threat* and the *victim* master frames "were pushing [solutions] in different directions (reception or rejection), they can now coexist because the response is the same: they might be victims, but they must be deported because this is the only possible response to the Moroccan government" (Bourekba et al. 2023). We see here a further passage in the argumentative spiral bringing to ever more "inevitable" inhumane responses, from limited reception, as in 2015, to outright deportation. On the basis of the image of migration as threat to security and burden for the economy, as an established matter of fact, victim narratives, while present, have no consequences, in favour of superior-order imperatives.

The narrative move for this argumentative nullification is the identification of a new enemy: not "migrants" anymore, but foreign governments or, as happened for many years, "human smugglers", the contrast to which requires tough border enforcement. Nonetheless, in order to dispose of asylum seekers, their representation often alludes to their threatening potential. An example of how victim narratives can be depowered in this way is provided by the British news media during the Eurotunnel crisis: before shifting to interviews with individual inhabitants of the 'Jungle' in Calais telling stories about their journey, a canon of the *victim* frame, news articles and TV footage "often opened with descriptions of migrants engaging in 'illegal' or threatening behaviour, such as breaching border infrastructure of some kind (fences) ("storming" "rushing" "breaching")" (Smellie 2023). For these reasons, the hybrid *realistic management* master frame in its present form looks more like the result of a rhetorical move, dictated by a growing awareness of the plight of asylum seekers, than a genuine synthesis of humanitarian and security reasons. Besides rhetorical needs, the spread of hybrid frames seems to depend on the successful building of a political technocratic consensus that is not found in highly polarised situations like the ones in Hungary and Italy, where frames showed up in their 'unadulterated' original form.

Rhetorical moves like this make for many hybrid narratives, when not frames. The moral scrutiny always pending over positions about migration brings to tactical discursive adaptations and narrative combinations that end up in contradictory statements and representations. Present common narratives on migration can be considered a mash-up of floating narrative fragments recomposed according to the momentary situation and required function. Refugees may appear as villains and victims at the same time. Either by narrative assemblage, as in the

example borrowed from the UK, or by their double agency – active and passive – very common in hybrid frames, where they are blamed for problems, but at the same time can be represented as weak subjects instrumentalised by more powerful and cunning entities, be they foreign governments (Spain and Hungary), NGOs (Italy), or human smugglers (everywhere).

For this reason, what is presented in the table are ideal-typical frames, sometimes situated in their more common but not univocal placement. As an example, although the (geo)political frame about *national or EU lack of cohesion* logically and empirically belongs to the *threat* master frame, it can easily be found in the hybrid *realistic management* and the *victim/humanity* master frames. Sub-frames, narratives and statements about causes, responsibilities and solutions are even more free-floating and have not been assigned to a single frame in the table, although they sometimes appear in relation to just one of them.

Dominant frames tell a lot about how migration and asylum are made meaningful, but the same goes for *missing* frames and narratives. Among the possible combinations of the two most general dimensions considered – problem/benefit issues and society/refugees as recipients – from which the four ‘pure’ master frames have been derived, the *black/brown hero* master frame shines by its absence. Despite narratives about migrants’ contribution to the economy and cultural diversity being a staple of pro-immigration discourse, and news about immigrant heroes being a sub-genre in itself, this kind of master frame could not be found in the six case studies considered. The economy, in particular, was a ground for interpretation only in the *threat* master frame, a result that shows how news and related commentary, especially in the case of events defined as crises and ‘photographed’ during their peak coverage, focus on the present, forgetting prospects for the future. Also, culture never featured as a dimension for defining an issue, even if we are all familiar with statements and narratives about cultural incompatibility, lack of integration, or, less frequently, their positive counterparts. We expect that in longer coverage, like that of the refugee crisis in 2015, the cultural dimension would have a better chance to emerge. Nonetheless, the relegation – and isolation – of ‘immigrant hero’ stories into a specific sub-genre and the lack of cultural and economic benefit frames tells about the negative tone of news on arrivals, presented as bad news. Another clear pattern regards the fact that the dimensions of culture and the economy are never articulated as problems for refugees (in the *victim* master frame) who may be impacted by cultural uprooting and exploitation. If ever, these problems are considered in crime or labour news. Similarly, the issue of racism was mentioned only in social media commentary in Italy.

Even if the social media did not introduce any different frames, their focus was different. More attention was given to solidarity protests and comments, and actually, in Germany, they were the platform on which these protests were coordinated. Besides, critical comments of government action were much more widespread on social media in the majority of countries. On the contrary, relatively little attention was given to political debates over policies, tactical decisions, and everyday quarrels, which were the staple of much news in traditional media. Less attention was also given to legal decisions and issues and to updates on events. Most interestingly, no hybrid frames were found in the social media. Indifferent to the technicalities of political management, and instead versed in clamorous confrontation, the social media were miles apart from the basic consensus that characterise mainstream media in certain countries. In the social networks, “positions seem irreconcilable, and the discussion is couched in Manichaeian terms of good and bad” (Bourekba et al. 2023).

c) Crisis narratives and boundary-making

A detailed presentation of all the narratives generated in the six case studies is not possible. As anticipated above, only narratives about causes, responsibilities and solutions are reported in the table (albeit in stylised form), since they are less context-dependent and tend to recur across time and frames. Nonetheless, an idea of the narratives employed is clear from the representation of characters and their role, the boundary making involved, and cultural objects like metaphors, archetypes, catchphrases, and mythical figures. For this, I draw from traditional media only, as the very short, often cryptic, cynical, ironic, or sarcastic comments on the social media present scarce material for this kind of analysis.

To start with, asylum seekers, despite being – in their will to move – the initiators of the story, are its protagonists in a minority of cases. News cover a lot of different diplomatic, political, economic, and legal aspects where they are just an object of discussion. When they are protagonists, this is in the reporting of the complicating incident, such as a collective trespassing attempt, and a few other occasions. When represented, also in pictures and footage, they often appear as formless, out-of-control, purposeless masses or groups of people, where they are caught from a distance. On some occasions, attention is given to individuals' personal dramas, their deaths, exhaustion, and desperation, especially in Spain and even more in Germany. On other occasions, particularly in the UK and France, refugees are depicted while breaking fences and laws, or defying security forces.

The exam of labels and qualifications applied to people on the move adds to their representation as faceless outsiders: in the case of Calais as narrated in the UK and France there were references to “refugees”, “asylum seekers”, “desperate people”, “displaced people”, but “migrants” was by far the most common designation as were the French noun “*clandestins*” and the modifiers “illegal” and “undocumented”. Other labels, in the UK, also gave a ‘criminal’ angle (“criminal gangs”, “foreign interlopers”, “stowaways”, “organised mob”, “intruders”, and “trespassers”).

Considering the representation of social action, the processes⁶ in which people on the move are involved are in general mainly material or behavioural, but rarely semiotic or mental. The rendition of what refugees do is particularly unsympathetic in France and the UK. They “intrude”, “try to cross/access/get in/pass/enter”, “trespass”, “wander”, “lay siege”, “invade”, “assault”, “try to sneak into illegally”, “hide”, “break in”, “raid”, “storm”, “illegally enter”, “take clandestine journeys across Europe”; they also “die”, “lose their lives”, “are injured”. It is really hard to find semiotic processes (“they speak only Arabic”), while, in a few occasions, their mental processes (perceptions, emotions, thoughts) are described: they “long to”, “aspire”, “hope”, “don't want to stay”.

In sum, asylum seekers either play the role of active subjects, but often in negative behaviour (especially in the UK and France), or of passive receivers/victims (especially in Italy, where they were confined on a ship: “sheltered”, “rescued”, “disembarked”, “assisted”, “relocated”). The role of victim is not their exclusive, however. The autochthonous population in contact with people on the move is often represented, across countries, as their hostage, “hunkered down

⁶ See Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) about this analytical framework in the analysis of social action.

inside the city walls”, “in fear” and “discomfort”, “worrying”, “nervous”, “annoyed”. Similarly, law enforcement is invariably “overwhelmed”, “at risk”, until it “regains control”.

This kind of narrative representation is a source of boundary making. In Spain, a Red Cross volunteer woman embracing an exhausted young sub-Saharan immigrant, whose image went viral on social media, was presented by the press as an “anonymous hero”, an “icon”, an “image of pure humanity” emerging from the “avalanche of immigrants” (*El País*, 20 May 2021). As the authors of the Spanish report write, “it is difficult not to see a racial subtheme in the contrast between Luna’s humanity and the avalanche caused by ‘others’, between the white subject of solidarity and its helpless black object” (Bourekba et al. 2023). Another prominent case of paternalistic story, and one where the ‘right’ racialisation is underlined, comes from Germany. The tabloid newspaper *Bild* featured a number of articles across several days on “the blonde girl of Lesbos”, with headlines such as “Diana is now in the camp she never wanted to be in” (19 September 2020) and “Her hope is Germany” (20 September 2020). In the absence of parallel stories about other dark-haired or of darker complexion children, the choice of a white girl to evoke empathy indicates the underlying racist ideology that confers worth to her situation. As the authors of the German report add, “if the positionality of ‘migrant’ is discursively encoded as Other, inter alia through skin colour, ethnic or religious attributes, then such Othering is destabilised, if only temporarily, by migrants or refugees [...] who are ‘white’, ‘Christian’ etc.” (Rheindorf and Vollmer 2023).

Narratives in news reports, in the need to find a common ground with their public’s “stock of knowledge” (Hall et al. 1978), are full of widely shared cultural objects, such as archetypes, metaphors, mythical figures, and catchphrases. The biblical image of the “land of milk and honey”, used in the UK, is a telling example of how these reference to a communal cultural archive may serve to seamlessly naturalise particular readings of reality. On second thought, archetypes, here meant as primordial images, universally present motifs or patterns of thought derived from literature and mythology, were already clearly visible in Table 4. The four ‘pure’, ‘quasi-platonic’ master frames presented correspond to familiar-archetypal roles: the *invader*, the *innocent victim*, the *hero* (often twisted toward the prodigal son redemption tale), and the *rescuer*. Even the hybrid *realistic management* frame seems to benefit from the analogy with the archetype of the *sage*. In this way, the media and their primary sources/storytellers offer the public stories they can relate to and identify with.

Metaphors are another rhetorical figure worth considering. With their ability to stimulate imagination, creating new and potentially misleading meanings transferring sense from one expression to another, and with their symbolic might, metaphors are a staple of political and media discourse. The metaphors we found in our news texts regarded mostly the definition of the incident or issue, confirming its strategic status as the core of frames. The principal domains from which metaphors were borrowed are (disastrous) natural phenomena (“avalanche”, “inundation”, “flood”, “storm”, “tide”, “wave”, “pour”, “swarms”), war (“attack”, “lay siege”, “raid”, “hoards”, “assaults”, “weaponise”), the border as intangible space to be protected like a home (“intruders”, “sacred borders”) and the biblical nemesis implied not only by the recurring image of the flood, but also by words such as “inferno”, “chaos”, “hell”. Not a particularly reassuring imagery, and one where refugees are an unwelcomed, menacing, and intractable fatality. The use of metaphors was common in tabloids and right-wing statements – both using also catchphrases like “young good-for-nothings”, or “fifth columnists that have infiltrated our ranks” – but was not rare at all also in broadsheets. Metaphors seem particularly

apt to make sense of the Other, re-signified with these bridges to different domains (such as war and natural disaster) and do not seem to be deemed necessary to represent domestic and European social actors or the destination country. In this case mythical figures and literary-derived cultural staples are sometimes used for the purpose of enlivening the story, as with the casting, in Italy, of Rickete and Salvini as “David outsmarting Goliath”, “Antigone vs. Creon”, or “Beauty and the Beast”.

d) *The structure of narrative opportunities in refugee arrivals*

It is now possible to characterize the representation of people on the move in this sub-genre, evaluating the effect of the structural peculiarities illustrated in Table 1. The narratives conveyed by the news media are constrained by several factors. Even if the presence of on-the-spot reporters and the availability of live footing can potentially shine a light on the conditions and perspectives of those who arrive, this gaze is sometimes hindered by the difficult access to far or segregated spaces. More importantly, a more individualised, empathic, and attentive reporting is often put aside by the overwhelming space occupied by political commentary or control measures, or by editorial lines that are not interested in providing multi-perspectival news.

In addition, in the case of high profile and suddenly developing events, the situation is often defined as a “crisis”. The affective meaning of the crisis changes in accordance to its being perceived as taking place in an external, separated space, or instead in a liminal space between outside and inside, bringing in two main alternative scenarios: in the first case, the crisis is *theirs*, paving the way to its obliteration (but in this case we would not talk about it) or to narratives and arguments about responsibility and care that portray asylum seekers as victims, as it happened in Germany. In the case of a liminal space, one that blurs the distinction between outside and inside (as they are, or are arriving from there, here), the crisis is *ours* and – given the consolidated idea of borders as intangible but besieged (Maneri and Quassoli 2016) – the emphasis is on disruption, threat, and its necessary containment. It is possible to interpret the hegemony of *threat* or hybrid, *rational*, master frames as the consequence of the predominance of liminal crises – in France, Spain, and the UK – over external ones. Other factors, such as behaviours that shift the role of the culprit from them to us, as it happened in Hungary and Italy, may complicate the outcome.

What is at stake in discourse about migrant arrivals and refugee arrivals, given their dramatic nature, is the strategic attribution of blame and guilt, so that the popular game becomes that of getting rid of guilt projecting blame on others (governments, NGOs, smugglers). This moral tension is at the centre of strategies that try to exploit the political opportunities offered by positioning oneself in respect to the crisis management. Impersonating the archetypical role of saviour of refugees or defender against the intruder is not only a common objective pursued by political adversaries, but also the way the media like to cast them. As arrivals are habitual events, the possibility to play the game is almost constant and political actors look as having elaborated consistent strategies to take advantage of the situation.

2.2 Debates on non-citizens' rights

The six case studies considered here are rather different in kind. Two are debates about a law proposal: the “Integration law”, discussed in the German media between late 2015 and the end of 2016, after its approval; and the “Citizenship law” proposal in Italy, studied during its peak coverage in June 2017, before it was withdrawn. Other three case studies regard quite different controversies: one about the anti-burkini decrees passed in some French towns in August 2016 and discussed until September; the other about the “National consultation on immigration and terrorism”, or the “fake public opinion survey”, in the words of its detractors, launched by the Hungarian government and covered between February and July 2015; and the last directed against the extreme-right wing party VOX for the placement of a poster blaming unaccompanied minors for costing too much (during a regional electoral campaign in Madrid, April-May 2021). Finally, the British case study was fashioned as a scandal, when it emerged in late 2017 (the study, however, covers the peak period in April 2018) that hundreds of people – called the “Windrush generation” – were being wrongfully detained, denied legal rights, and threatened with deportation by the Home Office.

Two debates over proposed laws, three controversies triggered by central or local government policies, or by the propaganda of a marginalized opposition party, and finally one full-fledged scandal, complete with eventual resignation, make for different contents and modes of media and political activation, while still remaining within the sub-genre characterization provided in Table 1. At the same time, they were all occasions for the discussion of immigration and its expected, feared, or desired impact on the destination society.

News stories about controversies – and debates on draft legislation, to a lesser extent – were often characterised by “strategic” frames. This means they were dedicated to reciprocal accusations – about the other party’s propaganda and its costs for taxpayers, its obsessions, incompetence, misleading arguments, being against national interest, manipulation, violence, lack of democratic virtues, etc.

This reveals not only how contentious the issue of immigration is, and one susceptible to exploitation for electoral purposes, but it has also consequences on the status of narratives and frames in this kind of coverage. First, narratives about migrants were seldom descriptive. They were used sometimes to make universal arguments based on particular negative episodes, generalised in reach or used to refer to a widespread feeling among citizens, or instead to depict stock apocalyptic scenarios of invasion, cultural and ethnic substitution, and the likes. However, more frequent were narratives – or arguments – of a normative, ethical, moral, speculative, historical, evaluative, or factual kind. This is also because we are not dealing with chronicles of a concrete event, but with an often abstract conversation that regards almost exclusively the justification or critique of actions and reactions in the political sphere.

Second, the strong presence of strategic frames means that issue-specific frames, the ones that ‘speak about’ migration and which are reported in Table 5, are often put at the service of arguments against the political enemy. As a result, the frames reported in the table are not always the dominant frames in a number of news stories but can be definitions of the issue or ways to frame arguments that cut across several news stories, maybe without ever being the dominant ones.

a) *Similar frames, different balance*

In this sub-genre, we find a different distribution of master frames. The *risk* master frame (renamed here because, more than a threat in the present, it refers to a risk for society in the future) is still very frequent and articulated in several dimensions and frames. Given the national scale of these debates, deemed as ‘home affairs’ even when foreign media cover the story, frames in the *geopolitical* dimension are absent while *nativist* framings of the issue – concerned with rights over national resources – appear more easily. The *legal* dimension appears only as a generic framing – as it does not regard migration but courts’ decisions over decrees or propaganda items – and for this reason is not included in the table. More interestingly, the *cultural* dimension becomes very important, and in some countries it is the main stake of the issue. The *moral* argument about economic migrants posing as refugees, and thus not deserving protection, which seems more pertinent to news on arrivals, appears here, signalling how established arguments travel from one domain to the other.

The *victim* master frame appears much less frequently in this sub-genre. A notable exception is provided by the Guardian, which published a series of human interest stories denouncing the human consequences of the Home Office policies with the words of the victims of the “Windrush generation”, photographed in their own homes or local environment using high-quality portraits where the protagonists looked straight into the camera. More typical uses of the victim master frame were accusations of fostering racism and discrimination launched against the government in Hungary and against the xenophobic party Vox in Spain. For the rest, the European media seem often unable to consider the negative consequences of proposed laws and decrees, let alone xenophobic propaganda, on actual human beings, focusing on a more abstract level that regards principles and reason. If people do not die near the shore, their vulnerability – sense of alienation or rejection, stigmatisation, cultural erasure and harassment – is not grasped.

TABLE 5. Frames, narratives, and arguments in debates on rights

	Master frames and associated emotions	Ground for issue definition	Frame (issue definition or stake)	Arguments and narratives	
Problem frames	Risk (for society) <i>Irritation, fear, discomfort, outrage, hostility, concern, resolution, frustration, annoyance</i>	Economy	Threat to wellbeing	You cannot take away our jobs	
			Burden on welfare	Minors are a cost for our welfare	
			Financial damage	Deporting and detaining migrants costs a lot of money	
		Security/ Sovereignty		Invasion	Migrants are flooding the country Too many rights are a pull factor Refugees need a firm hand No to the immigration policies of Brussels
				Terrorism	The radicalisation of Muslims must be avoided;
				Crime	They are violent, commit crimes, harass women;
		Nativism	Nationals first	Migrants' rights are a false problem: the real problem is our people lack of... They take away resources that should be allocated to our...	
		Health	Disease carriers	We cannot know what sorts of disease they may carry	
		Culture	Cultural identity	"Great replacement": our civilisation is disappearing Is the burkini compatible with secularism? Islam is attacking the country Muslims want to impose their presence	
	Lack of integration		Those who do not integrate must feel the consequences; Citizenship must be deserved passing through cultural assimilation		
	Morals	Refugees as economic migrants	Refugees are economic migrants in disguise		
	Hybrid	Far-sighted policymaking (manage risks for both sides) <i>No emotions</i>	Pragmatism	Rationality	Citizens' security and solidarity with the countries of origin are compatible Integration is the best guarantee for security
			Moral	Perpetrating role of victims	Minor delinquent would be better with their families in the home country and in prison Irresponsible immigration policies put minors and autochthonous people in danger
Civil rights			Protections by way of restrictions	Women are forced to wear the <i>burkini</i>	
Victim/humanitarian (problem for immigrants) <i>blame, anger, outrage, sympathy</i>	Human impact	Damage to lives and well-being	"Hostile environment" policies are cruel and inhumane		
	Social justice	Racism, discrimination	This policy fosters discrimination Migrants are victims of the opposing party's hate speech, racism, and discrimination Integration policies are too restrictive		
Benefit frames	Black/brown hero (benefit for society) <i>recognition</i>	Economy	Contribution	Integration is good for the economy Immigrants helped to rebuild the country	
	White provider (benefit for immigrants) <i>benevolence, righteousness</i>	Human impact	Welcome and protection	Immigrants must be protected Immigration must be encouraged	
		Ethics	Inclusion as value	It is a moral obligation to take care of... Immigration policy must be guided by the values of fairness and decency We can become refugees at any time We have been refugees in the past	
		Law	Legal obligation	The law does not allow to... It is a legal obligation to attend/help...	
		Culture	Assimilation and rights	Citizenship to young people that speak the language and sometimes even dialects is a due act.	
			Cultural tolerance	Restrictions do not make sense as women are free to wear, or not, religious symbols;	
Economy	Integration	The industry supports refugees' integration			

More positive framing, with ambiguities

Freed from the doom associated to refugee arrivals and correlated deaths, news stories about debates are characterised by more benefit frames. Foreign born residents and their offspring can be casted in the *hero* master frame, but only in their *contribution to the economy*, and just as a consideration about the past, in the UK, or in the appraisal coming from representatives of the business world in Germany, followed by critical comments on Twitter. Their contribution to cultural diversity, for example, sounds with its absence like a disgraced slogan from previous decades. More often, it is white locals that appear as wanting to provide the foreign born population with protection and inclusion, on humanitarian, legal, ethical, cultural, or economic grounds. To a certain extent, the predominance of autochthonous benefit providers as compared to allochthon heroes is the consequence of a conversation that regards white politicians, on which more is said in Section 3.3. Anyway, even in this *white provider* master frame, arguments in the cultural domain focus on their cultural *assimilation*, seen as a positive condition, or on *tolerance*, both of which imply a negative evaluation of cultural diversity.

This distribution of frames obscures strong national variations, which can be explained by structural differences – considered in the Conclusion – and the nature of the events examined. At first sight, controversies and scandals triggered by events related to xenophobic propaganda and policies (like in Hungary, Spain, and the UK) see the classic antagonism between *victim* and *risk* master frames (and the prevalence of the former), as not only the justification, but also the already tangible negative impact of discourses and policies is in the forefront. Debates and controversies dealing with law proposals or administrative decrees (like in France, Germany, and Italy), on the contrary, focused as they are on the rationale of provisions and their future effects, oppose *risk* and *white provider* master frames, that is efforts to protect ‘society’ from risks related to migration, or to protect people with a foreign background. In these cases, it is the risk framing that prevails.

b) Hybrid frames

Hybrid frames and arguments, where the management of risks is presented as caring for both migrants and the host society, are frequent in this sub-genre, if again absent in the social media. The *rationality* frame that combines security with solidarity and we already met in the refugee arrivals sub-genre is very common in debates as well, enriched here by the idea that not only solidarity, but also integration, may foster security. Also, migrants’ double role as victims and perpetrators, seen before in some narratives, appears in debates in a more explicit way, especially as regards minors, whose alternative statuses as vulnerable children and problematic youth may be exploited at will. Moreover, we see now another dimension, that of *civil rights*, where restrictions on non-citizens’ rights, for example with regard to wearing “religious symbols”, are implicitly justified with the idea of protecting subjugated women. This prohibition ‘for their own good’ underlines the ambiguities of hybrid frames. This ambiguity could be exploited to grant or alternatively deny rights but, with the exception of the argument about promoting integration as a way to grant security, they were all at the service of the disavowal of human or civil rights, revealing their rhetorical nature as defensive moves against potential accusations of anti-immigrant stance. In addition, their use of the “security risk” or the “misogynist Islam” stereotype as taken-for-granted facts reproduces those same assumptions.

In the absence of a dramatic topical event, in the debates sub-genre emotions are less in the forefront and, when they are, the target consists mainly of political opponents, with the exception of Twitter's less politically correct style. As we might expect, benefit frames are rarely associated with emotions, and the *far-sighted policymaking* hybrid master frame is emotionless. Pure problem frames are instead emotionally loaded. If the victim frame is less emotional than in the refugee arrivals sub-genre, in the *risk* master frame right-wing newspapers, their commentators, and social media users see non-citizens' rights as an existential threat and mobilise not only news production, but also emotional discourse. Their attitude is generally bellicose, with words such as "aggression", "slaughter", "capitulation", "totalitarian", "conquering", "threat", "fighting", "combat", "barricade", "war", "submission", "invaders", "partisans", "enemy", "end of our civilization", "dictatorship", "tyranny", "catastrophe", "impose", "moral blackmail". Another frequent attitude, this time not limited to the risk frame, nor to social media, is irony ("amused", "critical", "ironic" and "mocking") directed at political adversaries.

In debates, as before in "refugee's crises", social media commentary mirrors the frames used in traditional media, reflecting the development of the issue in the public domain. What changes, apart from the absence of hybrid and neutral frames, is their relative frequency. We find again more accusations to the government – a critical stance corroborated by quotations of international-press coverage of the issue – little interest in legal matters, and especially more space for frames related to terrorism, cultural identity (threatened by Muslims' religious practices) and crime, which borrow from narratives that made a long travel before being enrolled in these arguments. In other words, past narratives, and often ones that come from other places, live a second life in social media.

c) Narratives and boundary-making in debates

Looking now more closely at narratives, the scarce eventfulness of this sub-genre, made instead of more abstract and general statements, makes it difficult for journalists to cast memorable characters. It is possible, nonetheless, to examine the overall representation in terms of *dramatis personae* and their roles. In debates, the main characters end up being those who talk, especially when they resort to bombastic statements that let them take the stage. Politicians and experts (the latter mainly in France) were the main protagonists. Another way to emerge in the representation is through one's own actions, when they are deemed newsworthy by the media. As a consequence, judicial decisions, and NGOs' and immigrants' associations filed claims, did sometime make the news, in a central role in the case of the judiciary, or in a secondary one as was more frequent with NGOs.

A last way to be casted in the representation is to be the target of verbal reactions, policies, and decrees. More than in politicians, who are frequently under fire in these heated debates, this study is interested in the representation of the foreign-born population. The offspring of immigration was prominent in the already cited human interest stories published by the Guardian, and partly in Italy, in the instance of children who are denied citizenship – a characterization that was considered the most effective to elicit empathy from the target audience by the newspaper (*la Repubblica*) who published a series of video interviews (see also Pogliano and Frisina 2023). In both cases, immigration was not an abstract and ghostly collective but was represented by individuals with their own stories (even if, in Italy, those were not exactly stories and obscured the many possible other narratives of grown-up young Italians

without citizenship). In both cases, the active choice of a newspaper, supported by like-minded political parties, was at the origin of a different representation.

In contrast, the most typical portrayal of the non-autochthonous population features vague collectives whose humanity, in those abstract representations, is difficult to grasp. This may be due to targets of the issue under discussion that were undetermined or just imagined from the start, as was the case, respectively, of the law on immigrant integration in Germany and the National consultation on immigration and terrorism in Hungary. Or it may be explained by the difficulty of portraying the targeted subjects, as it happened in France with a private TV channel finding it difficult to collect images of women in burkini, in a controversy that concerned – in the words of one journalist interviewed – a garment that practically did not exist. Nonetheless, the media have a long history in the misrepresentation of minorities as subjects-like-us (even when they might dress differently), and also in these cases they could have humanised the issue much more.

Narrative representation varies, of course, across political lines and this is evident in each news outlet referential strategy (Reisigl and Wodak 2001), as it was, mostly, also in the case of refugee arrivals. The labels used to name those not considered autochthonous change as we go from left to right, passing from names expressing proximity or inclusion (“long-term Commonwealth-born UK residents”, “Windrush-era citizens”, “children”, “kids”, “sons of Italy”, “new Italians”), neutral, mainly denotative labels (“offspring of immigrants”, “foreign minors”, “people”, “women”, “individuals”, “second generation”), or names that convey a sense of distance, exclusion, or outright stigmatisation (“Muslims”, “Islamics” – used as a noun – “potential terrorists”, “sexual harassers”, “foreigners”, “illegal immigrants”).

It must be stressed that the latter labels (i.e. “Muslims”, “foreigners”) are not exclusionary in themselves. The overuse of a certain label in a negative context can connote the originally neutral meaning in derogatory terms. In Spain, the acronym MENAS (itself already a distancing device) became so negatively connoted that *El País* preferred to avoid it, using instead synonyms like “unaccompanied minors”. More generally, a decade-long discourse that casts immigration as a problem, at best, has resulted in “economic migrants”, “immigrants”, and “migrants” being referential strategies for exclusionary speech, while “refugee” is seen as the last bastion in a vocabulary that increasingly shifts towards pejorative connotations.

A different, but connected, referential strategy regards the use of over-lexicalisation (Halliday 1978) for boundary-making. In France, the press adopted a wide lexical repertoire to describe Islamic dresses (not only “burkini”, but also “hidjab”, “niqab”, “jilbeb”, “chams”, “gandoura”, etc.), giving “the impression of a colonisation of French by the Arabic language” (Moncada 2023). This adds to the widespread use of religious (Muslim) labels out of context, as an extreme case of undesirable immigration. This casts (that) religion as one of the most sensitive spots in the construction of symbolic barriers, especially in the French and Italian case studies.

As we expected, religion was not the only boundary marker. Other relevant ones were ethnic/racial origin, very often intersected with gender, and age. The combination of origin and gender (and often religion) is an established staple of discourse on immigration, with the common theme of the threat posed by male (Muslim) immigrants to the integrity of white women and of their challenge to the European value of gender equality, configuring a “racialisation of sexism” (Bourekba et al. 2023). Age boundaries may assume instead, as

suggested above, opposite connotations: that of the vulnerable child that deserves protection or that of the out-of-control male, foreigner, and maybe even Muslim adolescent.

Types of events

The media representation of social action helps us zero in on how different events – even in the same sub-genre – bring to different portrayals. In Italy and the UK, a scandal over Home Office mistreatment of long-established foreign born population and a debate over *Ius Soli* led to a rendition of the “sons of immigration” as suffering negative actions (in the UK, “denied health services”, “prevented from working”, “facing destitution, detention and possible deportation” or “encountering serious immigration problems”) or achieving positive outcomes (in the UK, “studying”, “working”, “bringing up children”, “paying taxes”, “contributing to society”; in Italy, “can attain”, “integrated”, “have passed”, “have accomplished”, “belong”, “live legally”, “may become”, “have studied”, “have attended”, “grew up”, “are working”, “be in possession”, “established”, “have completed”). In both cases, their “normal” daily life is seen as a process of integration – even if just as precondition to acquire citizenship, in Italy. They can even be implied in mental processes and emotions (in the UK, “fear”, “stress”, “anxiety”, “worry”; in Italy, “aware”, “know”, “understand”, “consider”, “aspire”, “want”, “enjoy”, “are happy”, “feel”, “sensed”, “judge”, “love”) and semiotic actions (“can ask”, “request”, “speak”, “respond”). What is striking is that, despite the harshly polarised positions in Italy, even the right-wing newspaper, in a debate about rights, had to use the same expressions, maybe to contrast them, but nonetheless prompting attention to those positive processes and in just one case resorting to its usual vocabulary (“invade”, “flank terrorism”).

The French case speaks of a different story. A repressive decree aimed at curbing the “ostentation” of “religious symbols”, less than one month after the jihadist raid in Nice, opened the door to a proliferation of mentions of negative actions completely disconnected from the measure, but triggered by the semiotic combination of the wound suffered by the country and the initiative supposedly taken to contain what – the burkini – is symbolically associated with it. As a consequence, Muslims “kill”, “fight”, “burn cars”, “traffic drug”, “keep pouring in”, “terrorise”, “seek to hide”, “invade”, “disembark”, “radicalise”, “provoke”, and must “learn to speak our language” and “respect all our laws”. On Twitter, this is accompanied by invitations to oppose the marketing and practice of halal meat, the construction of new mosques, and the wearing of the veil in public spaces.

d) The structure of narrative opportunities in debates on rights. A ‘colder’ sub-genre?

It is at this point possible to sketch the set of possibilities and limits to narrative production of this sub-genre, despite its high internal variability. The most noticeable difference with news about refugee arrivals is that the lack of eventfulness and the de-territorialised nature of debates deprives the media of fresh and vivid narratives to tell, in addition to the absence of dramatic material happenings that makes it difficult to film events and their protagonists, often presented with staged or repertoire images. This means that it is more difficult to find foreign-born residents in the spotlight, unless a precise and more interventionist strategy is adopted. In these argumentative and ‘rational’ conversations, emotions are less in the forefront, which adds to the difficulty in producing memorable and iconic stories that tend to define the shared meaning of immigration. The slow development of the coverage, unhindered as it is by unexpected external events to cover, leaves space for public initiatives that may be promoted

by the media, politicians, or activists that open sudden windows of attention that can be game changers, for example in the attention brought to foreign-born residents' claims, as done both by *the Guardian* and *la Repubblica*.

News about debates favour a slightly different array of frames. As a consequence of the change from dramatic material events to discussions about political provisions aimed at future changes, *victim* master frames lose ground in favour of *saviour* ones and *threat* appears in the form of *risk*. Besides, the national nature of the debated issues does not leave room for geopolitical frames, but favours instead *nativist* and *cultural* framings, and therefore the drawing of several boundaries of belonging. Differences between newspapers (but not TVs) are extremely marked, as they tend to put aside their chronicle function in favour of editorialising and partisan renditions of politicians' statements.

The deep stake at the basis of debates, grounded as they are on means to reach effects projected into the future, seems to be the recognition of one's principles, realism, reason, and foresight. This opens opportunities to show the adversaries' unreasonable policies and proposals, or, on the contrary, idealistic but dangerous do-gooders' spirit, when not betrayal. Reciprocal accusations mobilise emotions – although to a lower degree than in refugee arrivals – exploiting narratives of the 'children' of immigration, purposefully collected by the liberal media or, in the case of right-wing media, derivative and often phantasmal icons of terror, invasion, and backwardness borrowed from narratives stemming from other sub-genres.

2.3 Terror attacks

In contrast with the other two sub-genres, the events included here are strikingly similar across countries, with one exception. Four case studies concern jihadist attacks: the 29 October 2020 knife attack on the basilica in Nice by a 21-year-old Tunisian who crossed the Mediterranean via the Italian island of Lampedusa and killed three people; the 19 December 2016 strike with a truck on a Christmas market in Berlin that killed 13 people and injured 55 others, led by an unsuccessful asylum seeker from Tunisia; two vehicle-run attacks carried out in Barcelona and Cambrils on 17 and 18 August 2017 by a group of "well-integrated" young descendants of Moroccan immigrants, which resulted in the death of 14 people and the wounding of over 100 others; and finally the nail bombing in the foyer of the Manchester Arena by a 22-year-old British citizen with Libyan heritage on 22 May 2017, which killed 22 people and injured over 800. The last and, by all measures, idiosyncratic case is the 3 February 2018 supremacist shooting that wounded six black-skinned refugees in the Italian town of Macerata, when a man opened fire with the stated aim of 'avenging' a white girl killed by her Nigerian drug dealer. As we will see, the different representation of this case is a direct consequence of the inversion of the roles of victim and culprit between people with an autochthonous or a foreign background.

In this sub-genre, characterised by a dramatic, sudden and to a certain extent unexpected topical event we see a high proportion of breaking news, paired, nonetheless, by a conspicuous presence of feature stories and opinion articles. During the hectic days following the attack, journalists are typically engaged in the coverage of news that serve several functions: to take stock of the incident, *accounting the dead and wounded*; to reconstruct the timeline and every detail of the events, collecting *eye-witness accounts* as to provide a sense of control in such a moment of crisis; to keep track of the unfolding of events *covering* breaking

news about the *actions and decisions of major institutions*, including the eventual *manhunt for the perpetrator* and *investigations and judicial information*; and to highlight possible *heroic acts*, which are the best way to give courage, agency and hope to the staggered public.

In addition, a recurring feature of news coverage of terror attacks is the attempt to make sense of what appears as senseless violence and to document, and to a certain extent promote, the ways society and its institutions are impacted and react. Common ingredients in this standard menu are *portraits of the perpetrators and their biographical trajectory*, used to try to explain the unexplainable; news dedicated to rendering the *emotions of terror, fear, grief, anger, and loss of security*, interviewing survivors, witnesses, and other people living in the proximity or anywhere in the country; *portraits of the victims*, that make us empathise with subjects in whose place we could have been; *public manifestations of grief and solidarity*; commentary devoted to *interpretations of the event*; *political and civil society responses* that defy terrorism; explanations of *why the strike has not been prevented*; *reactions from Muslim communities or the terrorists' family members*; *reactions on social media*; and often coverage of “*ethnic tensions*” or backlash attacks.

a) *A different distribution of frames*

Besides listing topics, it is useful to describe recurrent frames in the journalistic coverage of attacks in order to gauge the angles from which the events were told. While, in the analysis of refugee arrivals and debates on rights, the stakes, or expected impact, implied by incidents and provisions were crucial in differentiating news-frames, in news on attacks the stake is constant: in front of a state failure, what is at risk is the intangibility of the body-state and its authority. News are thus dedicated to the disruption of normality and its (cognitive, emotive and concrete) re-establishment. As a consequence, the main variation among the news regards the nature of the impact, the possible explanations and responsibilities that make sense of the catastrophe, and the reactions and solutions proposed to overcome the major blow and prevent others.

TABLE 6. Frames and narratives on terror attacks

	Approach	Frame	Narratives or Emotions
Impact	Human impact	Suffering	<i>pain, concern, sadness, gloom</i>
	Emotive	Threat	<i>shock, distress, panic, alarm, anger, surprise, fear, terror, anxiety, insecurity</i>
	Commemorative	Mourning	Tributes and portrays from friends and family; <i>grief, sadness, pain, compassion, empathy</i>
	Documentary	'Ethnic' tensions	Ethnic tensions are spiking; <i>concern</i>
Explanations and responsibilities	Individualising	Mental health	Perpetrator's problems with substance abuse, unstable mental health
		(lack of) Integration	How is it possible that someone who was so integrated ended up committing such a crime?
		Revenge	The action was a revenge for...
	Cultural	Religion as ideology	(Jihadist Salafism) values the art of dissimulation to surprise the enemy We must distinguish between the 'good' and 'bad' Islam
		Radicalising pastors	Youngsters are vulnerable to radicalisation
		Muslim communities	Islamic communities are on the side of terrorists
		Racism	Hate speech spreads racism
	Social	Divided society	Our society is plagued by a climate of hatred
	Migratory	Immigration out of control	Immigration presents risk factors/creates social unrest
	Geopolitical	The country is a target because...	Failure of the country foreign policy
	Episodic	Other countries [Twitter]	X is to be blamed because... <i>distrust, suspicion</i>
		Security forces	
		Government	
NGOs [Twitter]			
Reactions and solutions	Attitude	Solidarity and defiance	The city is defiant We need resilience, unity, and coexistence Do not let division, hatred, and terror prevail We will not be paralysed by fear; <i>determination</i>
		Heroism	Stories of heroic acts; <i>admiration, respect, gratitude</i>
	Technocracy	Policing	Increase CCTV surveillance Fight spread of terrorism on social networks Improve intelligence services
	Prevention	Cooperation	Coordinate with third countries
	Repression and restrictions	Religion	Close certain mosques and Muslim religious associations Ban the veil Limit Muslim presence
		Radicalisation	Withdraw nationality from radicalised people Extend prison for radicalised
		Immigration	Fight illegal immigration Close borders or reinforce their controls Reduce immigration or restrict criteria for asylum Reform or suspend Schengen Restrict social assistance
		Exceptionalism	Do not stick to rule of law in the fight against terrorism

Making sense of collective trauma

By definition, no 'benefit frames' can be found in deadly attacks, and the issue is invariably defined as a problem for society. As a consequence, in Table 6 there are no master frames and only Impact, Explanations/Responsibilities, and Reactions/Solutions frames are distinguished, with the various approaches involved and the typical narratives and emotions. We can immediately see that, when "we" are the victims, empathy, affect, and grief in stories about impact are poured out in full force. Differently than in the victim master frame in refugee arrivals, where emotions were sometimes explicitly mentioned but were above all implied by some news' focus on refugees' suffering, in reporting terror attacks emotions are often *the* news-fact, with words like "terror", "panic", "trauma", "choc" in the headlines. On top of that, events on the ground such as vigils or commemorations and journalists' initiatives like portraits of the victims add empathy renewing the sense of unity and emotional engagement. Emotive and commemorative frames were very prominent in all countries but one, which is discussed below.

In news framed highlighting explanations and responsibilities, we may find a mix or the prevalence of either individualising, collective (cultural, social, or migratory), geopolitical or circumstantial interpretive tools. A useful distinction is one between *tactic* and *strategic* explanations. *Tactic* reasons, which include individualising factors referring to the perpetrator's specific inner features (mental health, motives) and episodic responsibilities (underestimation by security forces, responsibility of government, etc.) may help make sense of the incident, but not of the overall phenomenon of terror attacks. *Strategic* explanations, on the contrary, evoking cultural, social, or migratory causes, enlarge the issue beyond contingency and towards a deeper interpretation, which may serve a more 'ontological' worldview. Geopolitical explanations can serve both functions, questioning the country's foreign policy – but risking to dangerously put the blame on the victimised side – or going for circumstantial episodes that do not put the country's stand under the microscope. While tactical explanations may be required to understand a given incident, they are a typical way to not address deeper issues. Strategic explanations, conversely, do not shy away from providing reading keys that question the structure of society, but at the same time are tried and tested ideological arsenals for political quarrels. Both tactic and strategic explanation frames are used in every case study, in subtle ways, like associating and qualifying, or in more explicit forms. In social media, the site of political confrontation, only strategic explanations were mobilised, unabashedly and with higher frequency. A certain role was played by pre-existing xenophobic narratives and conspiracy theories, such as the one about "great replacement".

Among reaction and solution frames, we may distinguish between those oriented to Us, magnifying or promoting solidarity and heroism at the service of the community, or calling for more cooperation, and those oriented to Them, concentrating on ways to police, restrict, or repress the breeding broth of the attacker. Both Us- and Them- oriented reaction frames are heavily present. The latter often came, but not only, from bellicose statements or opinion articles by right-wing, xenophobic voices, or from the social media in which, however, also calls for political unity and coexistence and very strong expressions of solidarity were particularly frequent.

As anticipated, the – supremacist, not jihadist – raid in the Italian town of Macerata is an outlier in all the framing dimensions considered. The impact was represented very differently, with a

vocabulary of emotions dedicated to the town residents much more than to the actual victims, to which minimal if any portraits were dedicated (to the point that one of the main impact frames on Twitter was mourning, intended to show the respect for victims who had been disregarded by politicians and the media); neither would we find, looking at mainstream media, vigils, commemorations, mourning, or empathy, in line with a state response – by a centre-left government – that denied for several days a visit to the wounded and declined to participate to the mass demonstration held a week later. As far as explanation frames are regarded, racism was a predominant theme, whereas it was absent in other countries – as if jihadist attacks cannot have anything to do with people that may feel alienated from the rest of society for that reason. Yet the frame of racism was used in Italy only in tactical and not in strategic fashion. The racist nature of the raid was overwhelmingly recognised, but this did not lead to reflections about the racial hierarchies that made that indiscriminate assault of black skinned passers-by even thinkable. In accordance, individualising frames regarding the attacker’s troubled past (“only child of separated parents”, “a social outcast with enormous problems”) and psychological deficiencies (“child trapped in the body of an adult”, “a sick mind”) were used to distance the shooter from his ideological environment. A similar effect had the refusal by the mainstream, but not the social, media, to qualify the assault as “terrorist”. Finally, there were no Us-oriented reaction frames. Whilst solidarity and unity were sacrificed for “let’s all calm down” calls, repressive solutions were proposed, but for the victim’s side.

b) Indirect migration narratives

To understand this, it is necessary to remind that, in opposition to refugee arrivals and debates on rights, in this sub-genre the media do not deal with the issue of immigration per se. Interpreting the attack, politicians and the media can make or avoid a link (explicit or by association) between the event and a general issue related to immigration. In the aggregate, the link can be widespread, conditioning the media agenda, or confined to a few politicians and commentators.

In the UK and Germany, the association between the strike and immigration, or Muslim presence, was not prominent, and if it was, it was nuanced. Yet a different reaction took place on Twitter, where fear about religious minorities and anger at them and migration in general was not rare, and was disseminated predominantly, in the UK, by far-right voices outwith the country. The blaming of minorities was nonetheless contrasted in both countries by counter arguments.

In Spain and France, arguments by way of semiotic association were prevalent. In Spain, only *la Vanguardia* established an explicit correlation between the high number of Muslims living in Catalonia and the attacks. In other outlets, the link was more implicit, with the conflation of Moroccan origin, religion, and jihadist terrorism through the association of labels such as “Moroccan” (background), “terrorists”/“jihadists”, and references to (visible) religious practices. In France, similarly, only *Le Figaro* attacked Muslim religion as incompatible with French culture. Nonetheless, a debate about the opportunity of increasing administrative detention of foreigners established a link between immigration and terrorism, and this association was evident in news about the assaulter’s route with diagrams on immigration and photos of makeshift boats, crowds of migrants waiting to embark, and Lampedusa’s detention centre. On Twitter the link was more explicit, the main solution being stopping immigration or even deportations (“remigration”), and images built a strong parallel between immigration and

terrorism, blaming NGOs as terrorists' allies, something that was not done in mainstream media.

In Italy the link was made, but not the one that could be expected, given the roles of victim and culprits. Almost absent were the usual reportages about the (fascist and racist) *milieu* from which the aggressor came, as it was done with Salafist, Quaedist, and other Muslim networks in the case of jihadist terror attacks. In addition, all newspapers first-page headlines connected the event, by way of time, place, or cause, to the killing of Pamela Mastropietro – according to *il Giornale* “the last straw” (4 February, 1). Hence the thematic connection was not so much with racism, or fascism, but with “surging crime in Macerata”, or “Italians’ reactions to migrants’ crime”, that is, with (Italians’) security. Only one news story associated the episode to previous supremacist attacks, a link that was established in the other countries with previous jihadist ones.

c) Narrative characters and boundary making

Another way to look at this is to examine the narrativization of characters. As in the other sub-genres, I will consider here only the more articulated stories published by mainstream media. As we expected, politicians are featured as central characters more than anybody else in most of the cases. Security forces, members of Muslim communities, counter-terrorism experts, and witnesses have their place in the representation. What is most interesting, however, is the analysis of the representation of victims and perpetrators, and their projections onto the broader groups to which they belong.

Perpetrators attract a great deal of attention, for reasons that should be clear at this point. They appear as enigmas whose solution must be sought by excavating their past and personalities. Their description oscillates between the contemptible and cold-hearted ‘mature’ terrorist and the manipulated, imperturbable but vulnerable kid. Both are emotionless creatures, involved in doing and choosing to commit violence. Only in the case of the supremacist Traini we find a full humanisation. Despite hints to his fascist ideology, made explicit by neo-Nazi tattoos and a copy of the *Mein Kampf*, and a “jerk” epithet, his action is psychologically contextualised, with references to his emotions of anger and pain, which sometimes amount to a straightforward absolution: “dumb, not bad”, “romantic who loses his mind”, “was trying to bring justice”, according to *il Giornale*. The different projections of the assailants onto their groups have been already explored in the discussion about the establishment of a link between the assault and a general issue related to immigration. We have seen that these associations are very frequent, although to different degrees, and that in the case of the native aggressor (Traini), they were made not with his ideological background but with his (ethnic, racial, national?) territorial belonging. His feelings are dubbed into the community of insiders (“Italians”, Macerata’s residents, all of them implicitly autochthonous, “the people”, “the original population”, and “exasperated by illegality”).

The victims of attacks feature as central characters a bit less than perpetrators, except in the Italian case. The British “young girls”, ‘groups of children’, ‘innocent’, ‘beautiful little girl’, ‘beautiful soul’ conflict with the anonymous “group of asylum seekers”, “immigrants”, “foreigners”, but also “innocent victims” wounded by the Italian Traini. The victims’ projections onto their collectives are even more telling. Autochthonous victims reflect into the national community, with references to collective emotions and interviews with other nationals, clearly

parts of the same community. In Italy, instead, victims with a migrant background reflect onto a voiceless, ghostly collective, labelled as “irregular”, “*clandestine*” (illegals), and characterised by the moderate *Corriere della Sera* as “miserable”, “desperate”, “thousands”, “drug dealers”, “tens of millions ready to arrive”, “people we know nothing about”. On the right, qualifications are more crude: “legion”, “African hordes posing as refugees and staying at our expense”, “your migrants”, “new recruits” [of crime], “gangs” (*il Giornale*). Their actions are rarely affective, semiotic, or mental: they do not seem to feel, think, or talk. Instead, they appear as engaged in purely behavioural, mechanical activities, among which the media and politicians obsessively mention movement (“arrive”, “land”, “remain”, “invade”, “escape”) and crime (“commit crimes”, “deal drugs”, “kill”, “rape”, “pander”), feeling the need to “reckon” with the problem of “illegal”, “massive immigration”, in compliance with Traini’s claim. In sum, “rather than trying to understand Traini by investigating his political context, journalists have tried to explain, so to speak, the ‘inevitable victimization’ of asylum seekers, in a subtle form of the blaming the victim strategy” (Maneri et al. 2023).

Narrative characters are a strategic resource for boundary making. In all countries, these attacks to the intangibility of the territory trigger a national identity framework counterposing Us and Them that can take different paths. In Spain it was exploited to accuse the Catalan Government blaming its security forces, in an anti-autonomist move, and the other way around, to accuse the Spanish government. In France and the UK, the boundary was between republican/democratic values and Islam. In France, besides, testimonies of women were used to embody the nation’s feelings of sadness and fear, while men – asked to comment on a possible continuity between Islam and terrorism – were enrolled as “interpreters of the Koran” (Moncada 2023). In Italy, the media focused on asylum seekers as an alien body to the nation and not on their racialization, despite skin colour being the factor of choice in their victimization.

Myths, archetypes, and master narratives

Even more than in the other sub-genres, stories about terror attacks are rendered in mythical and archetypal forms. Their use of familiar cultural meanings from the past and of actors who can be casted to play those mythical roles in the present serves to re-establish a sense of order, domesticating unexpected incidents that constitute a generalised existential threat with the use of typical figures (Berkowitz and Nossek 2001). In his illustration of the New York Times rendering of 9/11, Lule (2002) identified the “myths” – here called archetypes – of the End of Innocence, the Victim, the Hero, and War. In our five case studies we did not find references to the End of Innocence, not a surprise after the long strip of terror attacks that have bloodied European countries. Instead, the archetype of the Victim, also rendered as “martyr”, “which transforms victims into heroes and death into sacrifice” (2002, 282) was central, offering a representation of society through its individuals. We have also already mentioned news dedicated to real or imaginary Heroes, whose reassuring role was not impersonated by politicians, as in 9/11, but by everyday people, a possible consequence of a decreasing loss of trust in national leaders. The metaphor of War, and its corresponding archetype, was quite widespread, preparing the public for conflict and exceptional measures. The Enemy, absent in the New York Times coverage by editorial choice, was present in our case studies as a distant but evil entity, “Daesh”, or “Isis”, or with the archetype of the Trickster (see also Berkowitz and Nossek 2001), who manipulates vulnerable youth. In the case of the supremacist attack, in place of the Enemy, or Trickster, we found the archetype of the Avenger (called in a few stories with this same word and the similar “defender”), used in combination with cinematic references

such as *Rambo*, *Taxi Driver*, and the Far West he had created. Despite being used to disparage and laugh at what was described, above all, as the act of a deranged lunatic, this archetype nonetheless served to make the public familiar and receptive to the aggressor's point of view. The enduring "master narrative" (Beeman 1991; Hackett and Zhao 1994) or national myth, of *Italiani brava gente* (Italians, good people) lingered over this representation, where Italians cannot be racist, at most exasperated.

Another master narrative – telling who we, our society, its institutions, and its values are – hovered in stories of terror attacks. The narrative is based on two similar archetypes: that of the Generous mother and that of the Hospitable home. Opinion editorials and feature articles, as well as political statements, offered a continual retelling of the master narrative of Western European society, one that interprets itself as based on democracy, tolerance, secularism, welfare, and human rights. This generous mother welcomed immigrants, offering work, welfare, protection, and religious freedom, but some of them have now turned against her, opposing their anti-values: fanaticism, intolerance, and violence, which threaten democracy. Here, however, the mythical consensus breaks in front of two options: preserve society's values and remain tolerant and open, although alert; or throw out the barbarians.

d) Re-establishing the symbolic order: narrative opportunities in terror attacks

The sub-genre of terror attacks, with its exceptional, dramatic, and historically momentous incidents, delivers shock and trauma and, at the same time, mobilizes solidarities that can transcend the national borders. The very high profile and emotive resonance of terrorist incidents transform narratives that originate in that context in powerful symbols that overflow to other sub-genres. The violation of the domestic space enhances frames that serve to represent and elaborate on the shattered order and to make sense of and react to the tragedy.

As the public seeks reassurance, the media gain importance and go in hyper-ventilation mode. They can take advantage of the abundance of political statements and commentary, frantic activity of law enforcement, access to eye-witnesses and to visual documentation on the spot. At the same time, one of the most sought-after information, the assaulters' portrayal and that of their *milieu*, is difficult to find or represent with pictures. In these case the media can resort to representational strategies that either offer the spectator a cold and flat portrayal of the assailant, with an indexical 'window' to reality (as in a mug-shot, or a social media profile picture), or, as we have seen, use images as symbolic abstractions through discursive associations based on a common stock of knowledge (see Chouliaraki 2006 for a theorisation of these modes of representation). In the case of this second option, images related to Muslim religion, such as the Koran, or to migration, as with overcrowded boats, give way to naturalised ideological readings of events. In addition, the live reporting of rituals and ceremonies organised by the establishment and presented with reverence, not only celebrates reconciliation but renews loyalty to legitimate authorities. The latter can indeed be challenged for their presumed failures, with the backing of the emotions sparked by the trauma, but this happened mainly in a country affected by deep institutional conflicts like Spain, as the call to unity is an obstacle to such conflicts.

What is at stake in the aftermath of terrorist attacks is the re-establishment of order. Public order, in a situation in which events appear out of control, is neither an easy nor sufficient objective. If the core values of society are symbolically under threat, a symbolic reaction is

required. Both journalists and politicians go back to normal, that is to say the dominant cultural order, embracing master narratives of the nation's values that use familiar archetypes to put things smoothly in their place. News on terrorism thus maintain cultural identities, contrasting them to the counter-identity of the enemy and reaffirming the vision that society promotes of itself. In this respect, the labelling of the incident as "terrorism" plays highly performative a role, "securitising" (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998) the issue at the highest possible level and thereby annihilating dissent. In the case of the supremacist attack, when all the major political forces refused this qualification, the threat to constitutionally enshrined values such as reject of fascism and racism was not securitised, so that a monopolistic chorus reasserting national values aborted, turning into the usual quarrel over immigration, where refugees cannot be martyrs, incarnations of the wounded nation, but inevitably remain others.

3. Narratives as process. Conditions, opportunities, strategies

We have seen so far the kind of narratives and frames that emerge in each news sub-genre and the different opportunities that the latter open up for them. In this section, a more general examination of the conditions, prospects, and strategies that characterise the process of narrative production and dissemination is offered. What are the factors that make dominant narratives on migration be produced, in the first place, and then spread, persist, and maybe have a transformative effect? Are there 'inner qualities' of successful narratives on migration? What is the role of the various kinds of media, and of non-media storytellers? Who has the most leverage to influence narrative production, what are their approaches, and what are the avenues for strategies of resistance?

3.1 When: the circumstances of narrative dominance and transformation

While the next sections will deal with the inner qualities, the storytellers, and the venues that lead to the success or marginalisation of certain narratives all other conditions being equal, here the focus is on what happens when the circumstances change. A first question concerns the 'right timing' for narrative success, that is, the propitious moments to draw attention on an incident and the related stories. A second question concerns what seemed to be typical stages in the media coverage. How constraining are these usual paths for narrative outcomes and can the agency of social actors deviate their course, challenging the dominant narratives? Furthermore, since many events we studied were labelled as "crises" by the media, what is the performativity of this definition? Can crises generate opportunities for the emergence of new narratives and frames and what can storytellers do to turn the situation in their favour? And finally, can we distinguish between events that are favourable or unfavourable for certain narratives and parties? If yes, is it possible that hegemonic narratives and frames have such an inertia that they are unaffected by the starting conditions?

a) *The right timing*

The intensity of the media coverage, and also the direction it takes, is often correlated with previous or upcoming events. Sometimes, the incident was considered relevant and given high profile because its connection with a previous event, or a series of, made it meaningful: a new government's law decree to stop refugees' reception that was tested for the first time by the arrival of the Sea Watch 3; or the 2015 "refugee crisis" as the backstage in front of which news on arrivals were framed. In every case, the sense of what happens is built in a dialogue with previous incidents and the related narratives, as it regularly happened with terror attacks, when a comparison with previous ones served to put them into perspective.

Other times, incipient elections bring political sides to exploit events related to immigration more than in other circumstances. Indeed, several of our case studies became high profile incidents or debates on the eve of important election rounds. The politicisation of the issue, be it in the form of breakthrough statements, accusations, acknowledgments, or apologies, validates the importance of the incident – drawing more coverage – feeds the media with statements and comments, and introduces new angles and correlated issues on which to report. By virtue of the special media activation, narratives that appear in these particular moments have more opportunities to spread. The direction they take has to do with the structural constraints provided by the kind of incident, on the one hand, and with the strategies adopted by the actors involved, on the other. One of these constraints regards the pattern that the coverage of certain events invariably seem to follow.

b) *Typical narrative stages and diverting factors*

Models of narrative unfolding?

A recurrent temptation in the literature about media events of the same kind is that of sketching the typical stages that characterise their unfolding. This is interesting for us because, as we have seen in the case of terrorist attacks, many of these 'stages' (the expressions of condolence, the heroic acts, the portraits of the victims, etc.) correspond to as many functions performed by the media and behave like shelves into which certain types of narratives can be placed (the unity of the social body, the reaction of the community, the innocence of the victims, etc.).

Indeed, we could distinguish regular topics that appeared, apparently, in the same empirical or logical sequence. In the case of refugee arrivals, for example, in several countries we found a coverage that followed the events on the ground, talking of a) chaos and suffering (favouring narratives both in the *victim* and the *threat* master frames); b) humanitarian response (with narratives only in the *victim* and *white saviour* master frames); c) short-term consequences; and finally d) re-establishment of order (with narratives in the security and rationality frames). In parallel, the media dedicated space to the (political) commentary, with: a) narratives allocating blame and/or responsibility (giving way to strategic frames); b) judgements about the moral implications of the events and reactions (favouring narratives about *human impact*); c) ideas about future refugee policies (mostly in the *rationality* master frame).

What characterises debates on migrant rights and integration is instead a pattern of (a) political initiatives, statements or revelations; (b) reactions that escalate media coverage, framing

events as a hot issue or even a "political crisis" and thereby enlarging the coverage to other media; (c) political responses, counter reactions, or public apologies/repentances; (d) other reactions, revelations, or follow-ups with more details on consequences.

In the case of terror attacks, in turn, we could see narratives about a) impact; b) perpetrators (leading to narratives about Them, possibly criminalising migration); c) re-establishment of order; d) public rituals of mourning and commemoration (leading to narratives about We); e) lessons to be drawn and solutions to prevent future attacks.

Nevertheless, this is a logical sequence and actually not always the one that actually unfolds. Narratives emerge and develop in parallel, not every news-outlet or platform moves at the same pace, and even within a single outlet the news can refer to several of these narratives on the same day. The problem is that despite common ingredients that follow a certain logical order, in fact in every sub-genre the coverage is extremely sensitive to (unexpected) developments on the ground, the initiative on the part of a certain outlet or challenger group, and statements by political actors, all of which may push narratives in different directions. Indeed, also the type of event within a single sub-genre is relevant in this respect. In the media rendition of migrants' arrivals, for example, one thing is a dramatic event like a fire or death along the route and another a confrontation between a Minister of the Interior and an NGO. Also, legislative debates, public controversies, and public crises make for different developments and narrative opportunities in the sub-genre of debates.

What brings the media to change direction

What is feasible for our study, more than finding sort of universal, 'natural' stages, is identifying the factors that are able to change the direction of the media coverage. As a matter of fact, a certain degree of routinisation of the media response to dramatic events cannot be denied, but these routines can bring to different outcomes in different circumstances. To begin with, the reactions of key politicians (and sometimes of other public bodies and even the Church), can hijack a certain issue bringing it to new territories. Without Berlusconi's statement about migrants as a "social bomb", after the supremacist raid in Macerata, we would have probably witnessed other kind of narratives, instead of those blaming the victims. A similar role was played, in debates, by public events staged by political forces, which in the Italian debate on the citizenship law, fuelled discussion, interviews, and opinion articles setting what was then perceived as the 'public mood' over the law initiative.

Other pivots of narrative turn have been decisions on the part of governments and judicial bodies, which not only provided new events to cover, but also new themes for discussion. While the reception of governmental action is not necessarily positive, in the case of judicial decision deliberations are almost always reported with the objectivity reserved to straight facts. What cannot be taken for granted, in this case, is its coverage by the media. In the Salvini vs. Sea Watch confrontation, the opening of a judiciary file in Rome on the possibility of the crime by Salvini of kidnapping migrants went unnoticed, while the investigation by Agrigento Public Prosecutor's Office on Rackete for aiding and abetting illegal immigration was on every news edition. Apparently, the news from Rome didn't fit the media focus on Lampedusa as the scene of the Story:

... because that was the competent prosecutor's office. The prosecutor had gone there, I remember him, he arrived at the port and somehow influenced the events. At that moment [...] he was responsible for what happened there ... then there are countless complaints, we do not always report them. Journalist, *Corriere della Sera*, IT_I_3 (cit. in Maneri et al. 2023)

When the situation makes it possible, even powerless actors can be the protagonists of a narrative change, although not always in their favour. While street protests after terrorist attacks under slogans such as “I am not afraid” (Barcelona, 26 August 2017) bring forward the protagonists narratives (with allies of the weight of the king of Spain – or other political leaders) other street protests may be framed as riots or extremists’ gatherings. Similarly, migrants’ or NGO’s initiatives may and, in a few cases, have dictated the facts to cover but hardly become the source of the new narrative consensus.

A powerful factor in narrative turns is provided by the media deliberate activation. With this, I do not mean the simple space provided to events or new evidence, which can itself be important: consider, for example, how two videos portraying the imperturbable terrorists in Ripoll (Catalonia) “marked a turning point in the narrative as they break with the image of innocent and vulnerable youngsters being manipulated by the imam [... framing them] as a threat” (Bourekba et al. 2023). I mean instead the advocate role that *the Guardian* played with the investigation that launched the “Windrush scandal” in the UK, bringing to public attention across the board on the victims’ harassment, wrongful detention, and deportations by the government “hostile environment” policies using their own narratives.

Other types of media activation may not influence the coverage of all mainstream news outlets, but can have a strong influence on the relative weight of different narratives, and possibly on political decision-making. During integration debates both in France and Italy, *il Giornale* (right-wing) and *le Figaro* (conservative) campaigned by publishing more than twice as many articles as the other newspapers considered, shifting the balance strongly toward the *risk* master frame. They did not change the way other news outlets covered the issue, but for sure influenced the conversation in social media and this swift reaction seemed to play a role, at least in Italy, persuading the government to abandon its reform of the citizenship law.

c) Do crises open up opportunities for new narratives?

A factor that may give way to the flourishing of new narratives is the definition of an event as “crisis”. In the literature on framing, crises, as disruptive and conflicted as they are, are often deemed able to alter dominant frames. During the crisis, public attention broadens to a variety of perspectives, causes, and solutions and frame repertoires proliferate even if, at a second stage, only a limited number of frames predominates. Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017) have found this pattern in the 2015 European “refugee crisis”.

Our case studies make clear that the production of new narratives in crises is not to be taken for granted, and that novelty and mobilisation are important factors in this respect. In addition, a distinction should be made between new narratives and frames and transformative ones (see Garcés-Mascareñas and Pastore 2022 for a conceptual examination of transformativity). Before discussing this, it must yet be noted that the event in question must be defined as

“crisis” in the first place, otherwise its performative power is seriously diminished. As we have just seen with the supremacist strike in Macerata, its de-securitisation undermined its potential.

It is not possible with our event-based qualitative data, collected only during the peak period of the crisis, to gauge a proliferation of frames followed by their consolidation around a limited number of options. Yet it is this author’s impression, and that of the authors of some of our national reports, that narratives appearing during the “crises” we studied were hardly new. Especially for news on refugee arrivals, the media covered events on the ground, which were surely not the first in their kind, or statements by political actors, who mainly picked up tried and tested arguments and narratives. Stereotypical renditions of events, especially in political commentary, were predominant.

Opportunities for transformative narratives?

In addition, one thing is a new narrative, and another a transformative one, which changes the way an issue is discussed and eventually the policies implemented. Scholarship on media events has argued that unexpected incidents like disasters, scandals, and public crises are potentially transformative (Cottle, 2004). “In these situations, the media create public narratives that emphasise not only the tragic distance between is and ought but the possibility of historically overcoming it” (Alexander and Jacobs 1998). Dominant institutions, exposed to failure and public criticism, become vulnerable. The shock generated by such crises can thus unleash new ideas that challenge established beliefs and narratives.

To have a transformative potential the crisis must put in question the work of institutions and not just for a minor, tactical error, but for a strategic deviation from their supposed mission. In terror attacks, this is unlikely as, despite possible mistakes in the prevention of the assault, the wound inflicted by the enemy commands solidarity and unity. In refugee arrivals, there seems to be enough consensus on the task of “controlling immigration” to prevent a radical questioning that would introduce transformative narratives into the mainstream, which continue being brought forward by groups that have marginal access to the media, or only in part by the opposition until it goes into government. On the contrary, the definition of refugees’ arrivals as “crisis” seems to reinforce and make appear existing predominant beliefs and narratives more urgent than ever.

Nevertheless, not only the agency of the media or challenger groups, as seen above, but also the novelty of the event, or of the point of view, can have a transformative potential. In Hungary, a journalist’s tripping of a refugee running across the border with his baby in his arms served to show iconically the loss of humanity induced by the security approach to migration. This was possible, however, only because of the activation of anti-government media outlets and civil society that kept the spotlight on an incident which the government was trying to ignore. In the UK, the *Guardian* campaign on the “Windrush generation” was transformative because, giving the voice to the victims of the “hostile environment” policies and thus introducing the unheard perspective of the generally silenced other side of policymaking, it could expose the government wrongdoing, precipitating a public crisis.

Frame reversal and frame crystallisation

This does not mean that new narratives and frames are always transformative. They may serve to the groups in power to react to unfavourable events – I will call this *frame reversal* – or, alternatively, to settle opposing narratives and frames into a new power consensus, which, borrowing from Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017), Bourekba et al. (2023) call *frame crystallisation*. The case mentioned above from Hungary clearly illustrates *frame reversal*. An unplanned event in an otherwise highly controlled public sphere provided independent actors with the opportunity to form a narrative that for once was not just a reaction to the government storytelling but an original and pro-active narrativization of a problematic incident. Pro-government and government controlled media initially remained silent, but in a later stage they elaborated a new narrative, transforming the event from unfavourable to favourable. Over time, the plot changed from “camerawoman trips over innocent refugees” to “innocent camerawoman gets nearly overrun by migrants and gets dragged through the mud by liberal media” with a switch of the role of the victim and culprit (Bognár et al. 2023). While the journalist’s acts were shown as “an understandable reaction of a tired, scared woman to the chaotic scene unfolding in front of her” focusing on “her state of mind and emotions during the events, and the suffering she endured because of the ‘witch-hunt’ by the liberal media following the events”, the former victim was presented as “a liar, a tool used by liberals, a terrorist, and a loser who, even though benefited from the fake victim position, could not even use the situation to his advantage in the long run as he was fired from his job for not learning the local language” (Bognár et al. 2023). This was paired with a labelling change where the Hungarian equivalent of the term “refugee”, prevalent even in pro-government media in the beginning of the coverage, was gradually substituted by the term “migrant”.

Similarly, in the Italian case of the supremacist raid in Macerata, migrants switched from victims to danger, via their dilution into a collective category that served to transform the nature of the threat “from racism to immigrants’ crime and ultimately to leftist radicalism” (Maneri et al. 2023). It must be pointed out that these narrative transformations can be effective especially when they take place during the peak of attention. Otherwise, the new interpretation they carry may arrive when the attention is mostly evaporated, as it happened in the occasion of the Hungarian tripping case, at least in the social media.

The case of the Ceuta crisis in Spain helps us to touch on *frame crystallisation*, a dynamic in which the formation of a novel frame leads to the construction of a new consensus that actually safeguards the priorities of state actors. Before that crisis, opposing threat and humanitarian master frames were used to make sense of the management of the border. During the incidents, though, the unanimity on blaming the Moroccan government, who allegedly had used migrants as a weapon to pressure the Spanish government, influenced the interpretation of the facts and the response to them. The need to restore order as swiftly as possible was at this point an imperative to avoid capitulation to a foreign state, so that the hybrid frame of ‘realistic’ border management was introduced and became dominant (Bourekba et al. 2023).

This frame crystallization, where journalists appear as having reached a certain level of agreement in the understanding of events, would become in the following months the new consensus for the interpretation of similar episodes and for the justification of related policies. Although the new hybrid frame was not really new, as it borrowed from the way similar issues

had been presented in other countries, it shows that the innovative framing of events perceived as crises may set a new standard in the rendition of incidents of the same kind.

One of the long-lasting effects of the affirmation of crystallised, hybrid, frames is the polysemic role reserved for refugees. They may not be a threat – for example because of their inner qualities or behaviour – but, despite being victims, they are still to be contained, even by violent means, because of their instrumentalisation (or even “weaponisation”) by foreign powers or actors, like NGOs, and even internal ones. Indeed, we can see an increasing use of this ambiguous victim-but-culprit-by-proxy role position, as testified by the narratives of VOX accusing the Spanish government for “calling” foreign minors into Spain and endangering them to fall into trafficking networks, or other narratives that cast Soros, the Left, or “do-gooders” all over Europe to bring in “illegal” migrants in cahoots with big business and foreign interests, undermining the security of national workers, retirees, or women. This narrative move brings to the reversal of the moral dimension, putting strategically the weight of guilt onto the adversaries’ shoulders, and has become a matrix that can be used to produce narratives in almost every kind of situation.

d) Circumstances, narrative opportunities, and hegemonic frames

Events can be favourable or unfavourable for certain narratives and narrators. During the examination of the case studies on which this comparative report builds, we were often struck by the way in which the particular nature of the event conditioned the various social actors, forcing them to react in order to bring immigration narratives back into the course they deemed most rewarding. In retrospect, can we discern a pattern, or even a structure, characterising favourable or unfavourable narrative opportunities? Is the pattern rigid or can it be subverted by the activities of social actors? Do certain frames play a role in favouring the most frequent outcomes of these political confrontations?

Events in the various sub-genres seem to make different strategies available to the parties involved. In debates on non-citizens’ rights, for example, there does not seem to be a predetermined pattern of narrative opportunities. There are no breaking news rushing in hard facts with all the constraints involved and the necessity to adjust everyone’s perspective. With the partial exception of the “Windrush generation” scandal, there is not an inescapable and unexpected starting point. In debates, the conversation develops gradually and every public statement sets the stage for the next utterance, although on the background of previous events and conversations, whose sedimented shared meaning can be decisive. “Facts” are generally overwhelmed by opinions and normative, ethical, moral, and practical arguments. At best, we have a political act or proposal, in tune with the well-known positions of its proponent, whose imagined implications are elaborated by each party carrying on its familiar arsenal of narratives. Each media outlet covers the chain of political statements favouring the narratives that best fit with its editorial line.

The opposite situation arises with terrorist attacks and refugee arrivals. The uncontrolled and unplanned disruption they represent are potential problems for governments that are generally found unprepared and possibly ill-equipped. Opposition parties are eager to exploit the opportunity relaying narratives that delegitimise their adversaries. Despite this hypothetical vulnerability, though, on balance these episodes turn out to be mostly favourable for incumbent governments.

Terror attacks, in principle, are made possible by a failure in the security apparatus and can be the consequence of mistaken policies. Nevertheless, an enemy on which to dump hostility is served on a silver platter to the ruling power, which casts itself as the protector of helpless citizens. Swift security measures showing a tough but just use of force are deployed, sometimes going as far as to declare a state of emergency. The perceived existential danger prompts solidarity and unity. The need to understand what and why it happened, therefore, hardly radically calls into question the government's actions. This leaves space for discussion but not to the point of undermining each party's position. A wealth of opportunities is opened for Them-oriented solutions linking migration and diversity to terrorism (on the part of both government and opposition parties), but also for we-oriented ones, with benevolent "we all stand together" slogans. A space is opened for policies targeting ethnic and religious minorities, but also for moderating such policies.

Arrivals of refugees are themselves conceived as crises. In today's securitised borders, refugees' entries are perceived as breaches opened in the besieged wall. Far from being an unfavourable situation for governments, nevertheless, humanitarian crises can be exploited for their own benefit. For a right-wing government, but increasingly so also for more moderate ones, this can be the occasion to show off their iron hand and play the politics of fear and protection. Not to take that route, at least for moderate governments, entails the risk of being exposed to the accusation of weak management of the border, of acts of reckless hospitality that amount to complicity with the enemy, or even, with an acrobatic but common twist, of bearing responsibility for "inevitable" violent xenophobic reactions. While right-wing governments naturally opt for the politics of fear, moderate ones often recur to solutions and justifications typical of the hybrid rationality frame. The most efficient strategy, though, is the identification of a suitable culprit, on which to project responsibility and blame. In our case studies the use of foreign states as culprits was fairly frequent (in Hungary, Italy, and Spain) but also NGOs and "migrants' smugglers" have long been tried and tested scapegoats.

TABLE 9. The structure of opportunities for narratives challenging governmental action

	Force	Solidarity
Too much	Wrongdoing (Excess of force) ↓ Victim master frame	Reckless hospitality (Excess of solidarity) ↓ Threat master frame
Too little	Weakness (Lack of force) ↓ Threat master frame	Looking away (Lack of solidarity) ↓ White saviour master frame

In the light of our case studies, these are the business-as-usual strategies to turn the problem into opportunity, be it a terror strike or a "refugee crisis". But not all cases ended up this way: there were some instances where the government could not resort to the aforementioned common strategies. Without going through them again, in Table 9 the factors that may put governmental action in question are summarised. Things went bad when political leaders could be accused with compelling evidence of being responsible for an unjustifiable use (too much

or too little) of their prerogatives. In the sub-genres we have considered, these mainly concerned (a) the use of force (administrative, judicial, police) to control “migrants” or those who are experienced as the ‘by-products’ of immigration, such as terrorists; and (b) the exercise of solidarity as regards immigration and asylum (providing tolerance, protection, or reception). Too much force brings to the accusation of *wrongdoing* and opens opportunities – as we have seen in the cases of tripped refugees, the “Windrush scandal” and, in part, with the Sea Watch 3 forbidden landing – for narratives in the victim master frame. Too much solidarity, conversely, is the occasion to accuse the adversary of *reckless hospitality* (as with the misleading catchphrase “open-door policies”) and opens opportunities for narratives in the threat master frame, as was evident in the powerful, if not hegemonic, right-wing reaction to the supremacist spree in Macerata. A similar opportunity, for the threat master frame, is opened by accusations of *weakness* in the management of borders, especially when blame cannot be turned onto other actors. Finally, the German case – with the accusation of debating but not acting in front of the destiny of refugees in Moria – offers a rather rare example of a public denunciation in mainstream media (although neither hegemonic nor radical) of *looking away* denying concrete solidarity, opening opportunities for narratives in the white saviour master frame.

An insight that arises from this argument regards the long-standing hegemony of the threat master frame. The taken-for-granted immigration/security nexus takes precedence in delegitimising accusations. At the end of the day, the main guilt is the weak enforcement of the border, and its twin sin of reckless hospitality, so that multiple strategies are developed to prevent the allegation. Poor reception is surely a theme in the discourse about migration, but this contention is unlikely consequential and does not put political careers at risk. In turn, the denunciation of wrongdoing in an over-zealous pursuit of the goal of security requires a radical, coordinated activation of the media and challenger groups that is neither easy nor common. As a consequence, the brown hero master frame (only seen in one debate on rights) has been ruled out of this structure of narrative opportunities, having little to do with the legitimisation of governmental action, caught between the imperative of security and the risk of excessive use of force necessary to guarantee it. Its uselessness as a weapon in the bellicose conversation over immigration could be one of the reasons why it was almost absent in our samples.

3.2 What: the qualities of successful narratives on migration

What brings specific narratives on migration to success is the central question from which the whole BRIDGE project starts. Here, however, the aim is to delimit the matter to the properties that give some stories a competitive advantage, even if in a certain cultural, circumstantial and infrastructural context. What features make for a good story on migration? Do different sub-genres allow for special opportunities? Are fresh and novel narratives alluring, or their pull lies in mashing up things we already know? And, finally, what is the impact of the main infrastructure on which they travel, do the media enhance, modify, or impair their potential for replication?

a) Narrative features

To assess the weight of the inherent features that make certain narratives ‘good’ and others ‘bad’, in an ideal situation, one would compare dominant narratives with ones that never made their way. Yet, we cannot know what is excluded from public discourse, but only guess it with

logical reasoning, as was made about missing frames in the first part of the report. Other two ways to pinpoint the features of narrative success are to speculate about the reasons why some narratives appeared but were not picked up by the majority of the media and to describe the features of the narratives that spread more easily and widely.

The basics of storytelling and the media

The basic features of a narrative are a spatio-temporal setting, a sequence of events unfolding in a plot, characters going through the events, and a take-home message, often a moral. Each of these ingredients contributes to the meaningfulness, engagement, dissemination potential, memorability, and transformativity of the story.

As for the setting, we can conceive of it in terms of contextual appeal. For the packaging of a good story, not all places and moments are equivalent. As we have already seen, proximate places make for more dramatic renderings and ones that, in the sub-genre of refugee arrivals, favour narratives in the threat master frame. In addition, also the moment in which a narrative appears is crucial and it will be discussed, together with other circumstances, in Section 3.1.

If the setting provides the contextual appeal of what journalists consider “the story”, the plot provides the cognitive and normative appeal (Garcés-Mascareñas and Pastore 2022). The chain of interrelated events sets out relationships between characters, conveying ideas of causality and allocating the narrative roles of heroes, villains, victims, and other secondary positions. As a consequence of the casting of individuals and collective entities in these archetypical narrative positions, and of the respective allocation of processes of doing, feeling, and saying, well-formed narratives offer not only a representation of events that orient narratees, but also a clear moral to the story.

To be true, news stories, especially in national affairs, are seldom cognitively and normatively compelling. Claim-makers with opposing views of a social problem, and therefore different narratives and allocations of the roles of villain and victim, compete for access to the media arena (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988), and often to the same news. Subjected to opposite pressures and inputs, the production of straight news does not always deliver straight narratives. If we add to the picture organisational and time constraints, which can lead newsrooms to assemble inconsistent materials, especially in the eternal construction site of online editions (see Smellie 2023 for an example in our case studies), we see that coherence and unequivocal meaning is not necessarily a staple of news stories. The opposite happens in news stories based on personalized story-telling (Bird and Dardenne 1987) characterised by the anecdotal lead and what has been dubbed the “strategic ritual of emotionality” (Wahl-Jorgensen 2013) where the narrative form delivers a one-dimensional and subjective understanding of the incidents and the emotional labour performed by characters engages audiences.

Sub-genres and storytelling

The latter kind of stories was frequent in the coverage of terror attacks, although often in mixed formats. In this sub-genre, emotional storytelling was deemed a priority and the roles of victim and villain were established once and for all, with added efforts to cast people in the role of heroes (see Rheindorf and Vollmer 2023 for an example). News stories of terror attacks

provided an overall well-formed narrative, with thrilling and live plots, clear attribution of the good and the bad, the invitation to identify with the victims, and dispensation of emotions galore.

News on refugee arrivals are more complicated in this respect, since the allocation of the roles of victim and perpetrator may be blurred, contested, or require contorted reasoning. When events offer easily identifiable and morally unambiguous characters, or when they can be scripted by the media, the emotive appeal is guaranteed. In the case of the tripped refugees in Hungary, a child as co-protagonist and victim, an abject and abundantly visually documented act, and the metaphorical reference to the whole story of the 2015 “refugee crisis” allowed for an unequivocal story and highly emotional language that engaged the public. However different audiences may be presented different and equally powerful narratives. In the confrontation between the Interior Minister Salvini and the captain of the Sea Watch 3 Carola Rackete, each audience was offered a different script: the piratical and dangerous act of the shameless, migrant smuggler, Rackete, or the cynical play putting refugees’ skin at stake by the “Minister of Evil”. Despite the lack of a shared meaning, both publics could empathise with their good, if contested, side.

Debates on rights seem to defy any attempt at compelling narratives. In debates the plot is not there to be discovered or reconstructed, events are far from dramatic, causal chains are all to be imagined, roles are not established once and for all. To the point that German journalists involved in the coverage of the integration law explicitly testified to the very little opportunity to create compelling narratives out of the law process (Rheindorf and Vollmer 2023). It is precisely under these circumstances that vitriolic statements find wide reception and that the ability to construct a compelling narrative can make all the difference. Vox’s poster in Spain juxtaposing an innocent pensioner abandoned by the state with a dangerous but well-paid unaccompanied minor of Moroccan origin is an example of effective storytelling. The mistreatment of old pensioners dispensed a straightforward moral reading, if based on fake data, and one capable of triggering the debate itself (Bourekba et al. 2023).

Fortunes and misfortunes of symbolisation

For narratives that must win the competition in the access to the media arena, symbolisation is crucial. Not only it can condense complex meanings in a single word or image, facilitating its portability but, eluding explicit reasoning, symbols can deliver plausible messages even when they are grounded on empirically incorrect bases. Symbols were at the core of narratives on immigrants’ rights. Just to give a few examples, in France burkini was singled out as the emblem of separatist identity, women subjugation, and Muslims’ unwillingness to integrate into a secular society. In Spain, the label MENA managed to “associate the acronym with a group: [male] Moroccans or North Africans who commit crimes” (Sidi Talebbuia, lawyer and activist, interview reported in Bourekba et al. 2023) not only conflating Moroccan male teenagers and crime, but also removing all other non-accompanied minors and their condition from the scene. In the UK, the label “Windrush generation”, despite the inaccuracy of the terminology (as most of the people affected were not on the ship and arrived significantly later), not only “helped simplify a complex issue”, but linked “the situation to an accepted narrative of the past” (Smellie 2023), that of a ship that came to “symbolise the start of Britain’s transition to a multicultural nation” (Gentleman 2019 cit. in Smellie 2022) thanks to a widely reported arrival with fanfare

and welcome. That narrative was so powerful that even the usually ‘anti-immigration’ tabloid *Daily Mail* was overwhelmingly critical of the Home office.

Nevertheless, condensing complex issues in short labels is not necessarily successful, as these can be counterproductive and insufficient to compensate for other shortcomings. The failed Italian law on citizenship is a case in point. Dubbing the law proposal *Ius soli*, and explaining very little about the requirements to obtain citizenship, lawmakers presented the law as one much more ‘permissive’ than it effectively was, favouring the reaction of those opposed to the reform. In addition, the promoters pointed to another symbol, the image of children “just like us”, but without using narratives that tell the many obstacles faced by the youth born in the country to foreign parents. As a consequence, the children-as-victim icon turned out to be a blunt weapon. To be persuasive in normative terms, narratives have to resonate with individuals’ experience allowing one to empathise, something that proved difficult without showing the concrete reality of discrimination. To be true, though, explaining legal technicalities and telling a complex reality is not easy in a media world based on soundbites, so that dramatic and polarising narratives based on slogans such as “potential terrorists”, “sell off of Italianness”, “self-invasion” seem – at least in our case studies – to enjoy a competitive advantage especially in debates on rights, mobilising emotions in an otherwise unexciting conversation.

b) Cultural resonance

Apart from providing clearcut plots and roles and soliciting identification and emotions, successful narratives need to resonate, be ‘recognized’, that is replicate familiar scripts, confirm common wisdom assumptions and stereotypes, evoke established master narratives, or fit into widely shared cultural preoccupations.

As a general rule, narratives in our sample borrowed from previous ones. This is not a similarity due to the fact of dealing with similar events, as if each story naturally sprang from the facts being recorded. The emplotment that mediates⁷ between reality and the corresponding representation – selecting, ordering, and interpreting – is, among other things, an intertextual filiation. What we are dealing with here, are narrative constructs that bring attention to certain actors, characteristics, actions, and relationships and not others and which, sometimes ritualistically, conjure up the same explanatory devices and feared consequences, albeit with differences in emphasis. Paraphrasing Bird and Dardenne (1987), each individual story on migration is written against a backdrop of other stories on the same subject. What they do is drawing inspiration from the general, European storytelling about migration and adding to it, hardly leaving behind any of its streams. In this way, the generative myth of migration builds its own, self-replicating, world, contributing to the diffusion of widely shared preoccupations.

Narrative producers are also narrative receivers who appropriate previous narratives and accumulate a common-sense knowledge that they share with the public. If we think in terms of frames, this means that the way events were framed in the past casts a shadow on the available interpretive angles in the present, as stories that fit the frame are more easily ‘discovered’, deemed consonant to the public’s expectations and hence persuasive. As a consequence, a familiar frame, which would be out of place in the absence of that common

⁷ I am referring here to Ricoeur’s (1984) second moment of *mimesis*.

symbolic stock, becomes usable. This is what happened on the occasion of the supremacist spree in Macerata, when the immigration-as-security-threat frame could eventually prevail despite an incident of the opposite sign (Maneri et al. 2023).

As Rheindorf and Vollmer note in their report (2023), the apparent ‘naturalness’ of hegemonic frames makes it difficult to call them into question, also because they are largely implicit and it is sufficient to allude to them in elliptic form. In their opinion, this taken-for-grantedness can be exploited to introduce into the media sphere and make acceptable non-hegemonic narratives that are embedded in the hegemonic frame. This is a common practice and we have seen this in Table 5 with the inclusive argument promoting citizenship as the best guarantee for security, a typically exclusionary frame. However, in such cases it is difficult to say how much the message of the hegemonic frame prevails or that of the narrative trying to fly on its wings.

In order to meet the public’s expectations, journalists and politicians not only recur to hegemonic frames, that is, part of the common ground between them and the public, but also to speculations about the state of public opinion. As a journalist working in a mainstream newspaper put,

We have a varied audience because Corriere is a system-newspaper, a country-newspaper. Corriere is Italy, basically. [...] If you want to understand how Italy is, you have to understand how Corriere della Sera is. (IT_I_6, cit. in Maneri et al. 2023)

This aspiration to correspond to the country’s attitudes, to represent it, is common to broadcasting TVs and mainstream newspapers. This makes the perception of what is the sentiment of public opinion not only politicians’ bread and butter, but to a good extent also journalists’. This perception cascades on which narratives are deemed more engaging and persuasive and will thus be promoted. Usually, polls and social media trends are used to stay in tune with the direction of public opinion. Yet, “in everyday inference, that of ‘public opinion’ is more the site of projections than of scientific investigation”, as anecdotal appraisals and superficial readings of complex tools such as opinion surveys prevail (Maneri et al. 2023). Evidence of this attempt at trying to attune one’s narratives to ‘what the people think’, whatever the gauge, was clear in the cases of the Italian debate on citizenship and the conversation about the Macerata supremacist attack, which led to a retreat on the part of the ‘pro-immigration’ forces in the light of a perceived xenophobic public opinion. The correspondence may go in the opposite direction, as when, in the aftermath of the terror strike at the Berlin market, calls for more surveillance were legitimised as the ‘will of the people’.

Among the factors that make narratives resonate with the public’s stock of knowledge, contributing to their success, is their correspondence with established master narratives, that is, the tales by which societies represent themselves. In Section 2 I drew some examples from our case studies, and in the Conclusions an attempt is made at sketching the way different countries tell migration and asylum according to their respective telling of themselves and their past. To conclude this part on the features that make for good narratives it is necessary to briefly consider their main carriers, namely traditional and social media (more on this in Section 3.4).

c) Professional news-values and media viability

Sure, the media convey narratives elaborated elsewhere, for example by politicians, experts, public officials, and NGOs. At the same time, they have relative autonomy, acting both as filters and as creators, as they a) need be able to collect them; b) must have the will to do that; c) compose narrative fragments crafting them into a big story; and d) can take the initiative promoting their own original narratives.

I have already quickly accounted for a) i.e. organisational constraints, such as personnel allocation that sometimes, while opening a window on events that happen on the 'stage' of the incident, can close it on others. We have also seen instances of d), i.e. the initiative taken by newspapers on migration, with investigative journalism on the "Windrush" scandal by *the Guardian*, the more political campaigning on the citizenship law by *la Repubblica*, and intense editorializing by *le Figaro* and *il Giornale*. Here I deal with two important factors behind professional choices to follow, and at the same time craft, certain stories.

The first one has to do with what newsrooms consider, in certain circumstances, a "good" story, one that they will follow, give salience, and that will likely be taken up by other news outlets and be shared in the social media. In the following excerpt, a German journalist offers his reading of the chronicle of the raid on the Berlin market, mixing what he believes really happened with what he would like to tell:

I still think that the Polish truck driver was a hero. It doesn't sit right with me to treat him like the other victims. As a journalist I have to tell the most compelling story I can. And he might have stopped the whole attack, I still think he tried to and fought, not just to save his own life. (DE_I_10, reported in Rheindorf and Vollmer 2023)

As already noted, a terrorist attack *requires* stories of resilience and above all a hero empowering the victimised community, so much so that this journalist, despite contrary evidence, still thinks that the poor truck driver was one, as he has "to tell the most compelling story". This sub-genre also necessitates a culprit on whom to unload negative emotions, a role for which was casted the Imam of Ripoll in Spain. Similarly, refugee arrivals open a slot for catastrophic imagination – be it expressed with metaphors of floods and storms, or incisive depictions of overwhelmed facilities and services – and for authorities restoring order.

Apart from these sub-genre specific narrative functions, media scholars have pinpointed a series of news-values that enhance newsworthiness across the board (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Gans 1979; Harcup and O'Neill 2001; 2017). They are so ingrained in news-making that we could detect them already in the first case study we performed. In the mainstream media coverage of the Sea Watch 3 forbidden landing, "the stories that were preferred were those considered novel, but at the same time in continuity with previous mediatized events, meaningful to the audience, consonant to widely shared expectations, atypical and dramatic, hence attention-hitting, and that could be personified. The professional values of completeness and accuracy, while still in place, were to a certain degree often twisted by this logic" (Maneri et al. 2023).

As a consequence, despite the noticeably little space conceded to refugees' voices, their suffering, with its dramatic quality and emotional engagement, makes for 'good' news. As does

every disruption caused by their attempts at trespassing. One could go so far as to say that while the narratives typical of the threat master frame are consequences of control policies, without which the idea of border security and the narrative of its violation would not exist, the narratives in the victim master frame are favoured by their inherent newsworthiness. This is not to say that those who propose the threat narrative are victims of the media. In the first place, they craft simple, media-friendly narratives out of intricate situations. Second, the media quest for the personification of complex problems with recognisable characters has created an arena for the display of a host of security paladins in search of visibility, and sometimes their antagonists:

At a certain point, the media played along with him and favoured him in every way. I remember: Salvini's media presence was suffocating. At all hours. [...] If they hadn't pumped him up, if they hadn't aroused him, if they hadn't given him all that presence, which was functional in my opinion to create this frame of the two Mattei [Matteo Renzi, leader of the centre-left coalition, and Matteo Salvini], of the two antagonists, the civilised one and the feral one... If the media hadn't played this game Salvini wouldn't have grown so much. (Writer/activist, member of writers' collective Wu Ming, IT_I_10, cit. in Maneri et al. 2023)

In some cases, newsworthiness can interfere with a balanced reporting. As will be illustrated below, when informing about the conversation in the social media, newspapers and Tv news often quote only their most extreme and xenophobic messages, to the point of misrepresenting their trends. A similar, and well-known, tendency is that of focusing on the physical or verbal violence in street protests, unless they are perceived to be in the mainstream. The reactions and counter-reactions triggered by this reporting increase the online engagement of this kind of news.

Having said this, there are cases when professional values put journalists in front of a dilemma: whether to report on extreme exclusionary narratives coming from the extreme-right, which are newsworthy but put the outlet in the role of their loudspeaker, or to restrain from reporting them, renouncing catchy news and abandoning the professional value of objective and impartial journalism in favour of a higher order responsibility. In our case studies we observed both behaviours, even in the same country (Germany), but the nose for 'good news' seemed to prevail.

3.3 Who: narrators, strategies, and barriers

After describing circumstances and the ingredients that contribute to narrative success, it is necessary to consider narrative producers. It is their discursive work that give narratives the content they have, and if the media is the sole responsible for putting together the 'big story', this is built on a series of other written and oral texts deeply embedded in the news-story assemblage. These sources – but we can consider them here “storytellers” – have been defined “primary definers” (Hall et al. 1978) as they offer a first definition of what the topic is about that works as a starting point on which other voices, and the media themselves in their role of “secondary definers”, must attune. The aim of this section is to examine the hierarchy of access to traditional and social media and the strategies and opportunities, but also the constraints and barriers, which confront each different voice.

a) *The hierarchy of access to traditional media*

In Table 7 the main voices quoted in news stories are reported⁸. As we can see, politicians have the lion's share, overwhelmingly in debates on non-citizens' rights, but also in the other two sub-genres. Even during debates, anyway, what arrives to the media are politicians' statements to the press or on the social media, not direct quotes from parliamentary debates, which are very rare. In refugee arrivals politicians' quota would be higher (48%) excluding the atypical case of the tripped refugee, when the Hungarian politicians made everything to downplay the incident ending up being just 2 percent of the voices. In Italy the major average share was recorded (59%) while in France it was not that high (36%), due to the strong presence of editorials and opinion pieces in the debate on Burkini and the important share held by the Eurotunnel company in the case of the trespassing of the English Channel.

The presence of civil servants is rather constant when there is a crisis to manage and less so in debates. Court decisions, police investigations, and the implementation of policies on the ground, not only often originated changes of topic in the media coverage, but also became key in giving other voices food for crafting new narratives.

Ordinary people are quoted mainly in the occasion of terror attacks, when they are interviewed in the important role of (potential) victims. In these cases, a lot of space in every country was dedicated to eyewitness accounts, relatives of victims, residents' expression of emotions.

TABLE 7. Voices reported in traditional media. Percentages

	Refugee arrivals	Debates on rights	Terror attacks	Mean
Politicians	39	60	34	44
Civil servants	11	7	11	10
Ordinary people	6	8	24	13
NGOs	15	4	2	7
Migrants ⁹	9	5	16	10
Others	20	16	13	16
Total	100	100	100	100

The voice of migrants – by definition the only necessary protagonists in all three sub-genres, even if just as recipients of policies in the case of debates on rights – is rather infrequent, even in events in which they are absolute protagonists. However, this varies considerably across sub-genres. It takes 9 percent of the share in refugee arrivals, with interviews on site describing the travel and plans for the future. It is quite scarce in debates that, despite targeting people with a foreign background, almost never give them a voice (if we exclude the “Windrush scandal”, with its big space dedicated to non-autochthonous voices, their average share plummets to 2 percent). Yet allochthons are often quoted in the aftermath of terror attacks, when they are offered space to distance themselves from the attackers, describe how they are being collectively blamed despite being just as shocked by the raid as anyone else, or provide details of the perpetrators, in the case of acquaintances and relatives.

⁸ The data is based on the first three voices quoted in each news item in 13 out of 17 case studies, as data in Germany and on the debate in Hungary were not collected for various reasons.

⁹ Self-identified.

In short, to be given a voice migrants must play the role of informants, suspects dismissing allegations, or victims of prejudice that are nonetheless required, to an extent, to produce exculpatory evidence. Outside these roles, there is not space for the offspring of immigration. In France, where the assailant had just entered the country, only 3 percent of the share was given to them, despite the Muslim minority being blamed for the attack. In Italy, where foreigners were the victims of the spree, not a single news-story offered them the microphone.

Apart from the narrow role of suspect or informant – about oneself, in the case of refugee arrivals – migrants are rarely given the possibility to express feelings and especially opinions. Their spokespersons, so to speak, are activists and above all civil society organisations and NGOs. Their role is particularly prominent in news on arrivals, where they provide most of the ‘welcome’ narratives. It is still relevant, if quantitatively small, in debates and tends to disappear in the case of terror attacks, when people with an immigrant background dismiss the accusations in person.

To complete the picture of the voices whose speech is reported, it is worth mentioning members of the clergy, celebrities, and other media; private companies and foreign governments and media, only in the case of refugee arrivals; and experts, especially in the occasion of terror attacks.

Only migrants were indeed deprived of the possibility of expressing opinions. The hierarchy of access to mainstream media, and thus to the potential role of storyteller, frequently appears the privilege of people in positions of political, executive, cultural, and sometimes religious or economic authority. While politicians (especially when in government) and civil servants mainly proposed restrictive narratives (as in Hayes 2008), in the threat and hybrid master frames, religious and economic authorities proved to be more willing to propose welcome narratives, while the media could embrace any frame. NGOs and especially political movements, devoid of the above mentioned forms of authority capital, could gain their share of access, but only at the conditions examined below in Subsection c).

In terms of gender, the share of women’s verbal reactions ranges from 50 to 10 percent across case studies¹⁰, with particularly low numbers in Italy and the UK (but not in the Windrush scandal) and most cases under 30 percent. When it comes to journalists, the women’s share is only slightly better¹¹. Only in France a strong prevalence of men in xenophobic editorials and tweets was noticed. The impact of this strong gender imbalance is not very clear though.

It is politicians who act as main disseminators of narratives. Their statements travelled across traditional media reappearing in similar forms, provided the media with cues to produce new stories, and legitimised and promoted new vocabulary to speak about migration. When in government, their actions, in turn, provided a conspicuous part of the raw facts on which the media composed their narratives, with the help of the same politicians’ and public officials’ press conferences and releases.

¹⁰ Based on 11 case studies. Data from Hungary, Germany, and one event in Spain were not provided.

¹¹ Based on 12 case studies. Data from Germany and Hungary were not provided.

b) Mobilisation and engagement in social media

On social media, we cannot speak of a hierarchy of access, as this is within almost everyone's reach. Indeed, as we can see in Table 8¹², ordinary people (mostly activists and online influencers, but also professionals and academics) are much more present (in Italy and the UK the most). Their participation is particularly evident in terror attacks, when Twitter can be used to express solidarity and organise demonstrations.

TABLE 8. Social media accounts. Percentages

	Refugee arrivals	Debates on rights	Terror attacks	Mean
Politicians	14	35	12	20
News media	46	29	28	34
Ordinary people	12	22	55	29
NGOs	9	8	1	6
Migrants	2	3	0	2
Others	17	3	5	8
Total	100	100	100	100

Another strong presence in social media is that of the news media, across subgenres and countries,¹³ including journalists' personal accounts. The influence of traditional media is also evident considering what we have classified as "others", some of whom are personnel of other institutions, such as security forces, but much more often people who achieved popularity and thus a high number of social media followers thanks to their frequent presence on TV (celebrities such as news anchors, television presenters, writers, athletes, artists, regular TV guests) or on other mainstream media, like bloggers. On the other hand, some data seems to suggest that, despite their strong presence, mainstream media posts are generally not those who gets the most engagement.

The presence of NGOs on social media is similar to the one on the press and TV. They seem to be particularly strong in Germany, where in the cases of the fire in Moria and the debate on the immigration law they could act as migrants' advocates, with a share of 26 percent of the 100 most retweeted messages.

Accounts of people speaking from a migrant positionality are very few, although slightly more frequent in debates on rights, which involve associations, representatives and individuals with a foreign background established in the country and with more possibilities to have a social media presence. Moreover, their voice can be quoted by politicians, mainstream media, and NGOs, and indeed it was, at least in Italy, Germany, Hungary, and the UK. After being referenced by these more established accounts, tweets by people speaking as ethnic minorities can reach a higher engagement.

¹² The data is based on the accounts of the 100 messages with the highest engagement, in 13 out of 17 case studies, as data in the cases of the refugee arrival in Spain, of the debate on rights in Italy, and of the terror strikes in Spain and Germany were not collected for various reasons.

¹³ Hungary is an outlier in this respect, with a huge proportion of media accounts (66%) that can be due to the choice to examine Facebook instead of Twitter and possibly to a different landscape of online only media initiatives.

Politicians, in comparison to their top influence on mainstream media, are significantly scaled down on social media. Only in debates do they maintain the leading role. Yet, it should not be forgotten that influence in social media is measured by the number of shares, and while the posts we studied are the 100 most shared per case studied, they are not equivalent to each other. Due to their enormous number of followers, the most active politicians on social media have a weight beyond their actual share of the top 100. The same is true for some celebrities and media accounts. In addition, as it happens in the mainstream media, politicians are often mentioned, for better or worse, so that their message reaches far further than these numbers might suggest.

In sum, social media provides space for a diverse range of voices. Some of these perspectives – from activists and even celebrities when it comes to their political opinions – would otherwise be poorly represented. Politicians' grip on the conversation is way less firm and mainstream media have to fight for visibility like anybody else. Yet, while providing a platform for narratives disseminated by laypeople, the social media rarely change the overall picture, with the exceptions that we shall discuss in Section 3.4. Additionally, the gender imbalance on Twitter was not different from that in traditional media¹⁴.

c) Opportunities, constraints, and strategies to have a voice

Ascertaining which categories of people are given a voice in the media is not enough to understand the role that various storytellers have in the production of different narratives. A case in point is offered by the most important group, politicians, who are often divided into fighting fronts, delivering opposite narratives.

Political investment on immigration

It is a well-known evidence that right-wing political forces tend to promote restrictive frames while left-wing ones prefer what we called welcome frames. In almost every case, there was a strong presence of extreme right-wing political voices and politicians on Twitter. Conversely, extreme left voices, let alone politicians, were much less frequent. In traditional media, the balance was more in favour of moderate political forces, but the far right was insistently covered in several cases, while the far-left almost never. No surprise, then, that the threat master frame seemed to prevail overall.

If the far-left is denied access to the traditional media, the centre-left seems not very much invested in the issue. As a French journalist puts it:

It's a theme that the right-wing is more likely to take up. You only have to look at the presidential programmes. [...] The right-wing programmes were much more prolific than those of the left on immigration. It was out of all proportion. [...] The right has a greater say on these issues than the left. (FR_I_10, cit. in Moncada 2023)

¹⁴ Based on 14 case studies, as data from two events in Spain and one in Germany were not provided.

In all cases, it stands out clearly that right-wing politicians have chosen the “threat” posed by immigration as their workhorse, casting themselves as moral (or, more precisely in this context, political) entrepreneurs¹⁵ of security:

there is a lack of a political entrepreneur of rights, someone who calls things by their name [...]. It's not that these political entrepreneurs of rights don't exist [...] but they are marginal in terms of public communication. It is an empty space [...] in which one can throw oneself because there is no one... instead it is considered an uncomfortable topic by those who should have filled it with slogans and contents that go in the direction of the enlargement of rights. (Association executive, ARCI, IT_I_5, cit. in Maneri et al. 2023)

This interviewee is comparing, if implicitly, the political activism of the right to the moderate-left attitude to keep away from an issue that is considered a vote loser. The ability of right-wing politicians and commentators to impose threat frames has made liberals and progressives very shy in exposing themselves on the topic of migration, often falling back on hybrid frames that, validating the opponent's frame respectable side, strengthen the message – and the adversaries – further.

Even the critique of threat narratives has the effect of replicating the adversary's frame, spreading its ideas. It was only in circumstances in which political entrepreneurs of human rights took the initiative that they could define the media agenda imposing their frames. This happened in a few cases when the government or its allies were deemed responsible for something seriously wrong, offering a political opportunity. Despite the fact that, in general, political parties who are in government receive more space in the media, in these occasions opposition forces could dictate the media agenda, as it happened in the case of the tripped refugee in Hungary and in the Windrush scandal in the UK.

How political entrepreneurs of (in)security exploit media interest

The strategies of the political entrepreneurs of (in)security are similar all over Europe: they stick to the issue presiding over the debate by ensuring their presence on all possible platforms 24 hours a day and constantly over time. First, they massively mobilise on the social media, their preferred avenue to be quoted in mainstream media once their messages produce high engagement and, increasingly so, even when they do not. Debates on rights in Spain and Italy are two good examples of this mobilisation. In Spain, where more than half of the top 100 engaging tweets came from political actors, 98 percent belonged to VOX, whose propaganda action had initiated the debate. In Italy, where instead the conversation had been started by the centre-left coalition with its law proposal, right-wing or extreme right-wing politicians, in terms of Twitter engagement, still occupied the first, the third, the fifteenth, the twenty-third place, and the twenty-fifth position. To find the first politician from the left among the 100 most retweeted messages we have to go down to the twenty-seventh position. Of the 60 tweets against the reform proposing the *lus soli*, 23 came from accounts of right-wing political actors; while only 4 of the 40 tweets in favour of the reform came from centre-left political actors.

¹⁵ The term was introduced by Becker (1963) for individuals or groups that persuade society to enforce norms for behaviour labelled as deviant.

Mainstream media are very interested in this kind of xenophobic hyper-activity, both because of the newsworthiness of the dramatic language used and because it is a constant, prolific, and cheap source of 'facts' to cover:

Salvini's media power and arrogance was very strong and overshadowed everyone. [...] His tweets were constant and so we were always checking to see what he was saying. His words were heavy and strong...harsh. 'The little braggart', 'They can stay at sea until Christmas', 'They will never disembark'... So it's clear that in terms of language he was fundamental to us and to the narrative. And as a result, wherever he went, he was always asked something by journalists about the Sea Watch affair and his comments went on the page. So he was the first source. (Journalist, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, IT_I_2, cit. in Maneri et al. 2023)

Salvini is very efficient [with his social communication], because we need news and he constantly gives us news. I don't choose him because I like him more than others, but because I report the news he has given me. (Journalist, *Corriere della Sera*, IT_I_3, cit. in Maneri et al. 2023)

Xenophobic political leaders are not alone in presiding social media. As illustrated in Moncada (2023) and Maneri et al. (2023) their message is backed and reproduced by a galaxy of accounts belonging to their supporters, be they journalists or activists. We found an analogous, diffused participation of human rights advocates, but they rarely endorsed 'their' political leaders' messages, in fact often criticizing their weak reaction.

At times, human rights mobilisations can take the lead on social media, as it happened in Hungary and Italy, whose xenophobic governments probably urged their opponents to at least guard social media. In the cases of the Sea Watch 3 and of the attack in Macerata in Italy, for example, messages stemming from the human rights or the anti-racist fronts amounted to a total number of retweets – that is, of intentional actions to spread the message – which was, respectively, 4.6 and 2.5 times the number of retweets in the sovereignty frame.

Yet, and here comes a second strategy, security entrepreneurs are not only massively present, but they are *persistent*. The human rights mobilisations just described remained sustained throughout the peak of attention but, once the effervescence and urgency to react had worn off, they faded – after all, these people had to attend to their commitments in other professional spheres or in daily life. From their side, the patient work of their opponents – full-time politicians and journalists in addition to a few news websites – continued undaunted. In the course of the following year, in our extended sample of tweets, human rights influencers were not on those particular issues anymore, just a handful not including politicians, while Salvini and his allies continued with their political bet on refugees, occupying a space left almost empty. In the other case studies where an extended sample was examined, namely in Spain and Hungary, a similar phenomenon was registered.

This continuous presence requires: a) organisation and funding; b) coherence and simplicity of the message; c) coordination of offline and social media activity; d) and the creation of new events to feed the media need for news. The school case in this regard is that of Matteo Salvini's *Lega*. Although a veneer of secrecy surrounds the activities of the "beast", as his powerful social media propaganda team is dubbed, it is a matter of fact that the *funding* poured

onto it and its operational capacity are out of all proportions. The continuous, individualized, and personalized communication strategies employed (Bracciale, Andretta, and Martella 2021) would not be possible otherwise.

The message from *Lega* and similar parties all over Europe is *straight and simple*, helping the spread of the message:

Di Maio [leader of the party at the time in government with the League] ... on the one hand, he said that the Sea Watch was taking advantage of the event to gain publicity; on the other, he said that the Government had to help the migrants. So it was not clear what he wanted. Salvini had a very clear position, not the others. This is one reason for his visibility and for their invisibility. (Journalist, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, IT_I_2, cit. in Maneri et al. 2023)

An univocal and straightforward message is favoured by the centralisation of communication in the leaders' hands and the conflation between he or she and the party itself, which is a staple of all so-called populist parties (Gerbaudo 2019). In the broader context of the disintermediation of politics (Robles-Morales and Córdoba-Hernández 2019), centralised and personalised parties, like the *Lega* (Zulianello 2021), gain visibility. "The leader may even say things that contradict each other, but this will make the media even more curious, eager to discover his true intentions, as in previous years the pioneering figure of Silvio Berlusconi had showed everyone in Italian politics. When contradictions arise in the normal dynamics of a plural party, the result is instead one of dispersion, of an absence of narrative impact" (Maneri et al. 2023).

In addition, the marketing principle of "phygital" activism – that is, the *coordination of physical actions on the ground and digital activism on social media* – multiplies the message bouncing between activists, traditional media, and social networks (Zulianello 2021). In Italy, the government became convinced that the climate of opinion on the *lus soli* was changing after a series of staged offline, accurately timed, conflicts promoted and commented online that exploited mainstream media interest.

Finally, the media is eager for *novelty*, both in the sense of new characters and new events:

the extreme right has nevertheless risen in recent years. (...) I think that's maybe why I think that even indifferently, we talk about them more than the extreme left. (Journalist, FR_I_8, cit. in Moncada 2023)

Sovereignist parties are enjoying their moment in the media consideration. Nevertheless, they also create events anew to renovate media interest, as did Vox with its poster on MENA, right-wing administrators with the ban on *burkini*, and Salvini with a law decree that would later produce its confrontation with Rackete.

Strategies and constraints for marginalised voices

Nonetheless, similar strategies may be exploited by ventriloquists of migrants' perspective, such as NGOs. They do not always need to. Having access to relevant information, having shown their reliability as sources in the past, and being equipped with press offices (Cottle

2003), and now social media teams, NGOs and other civil society organisations have gained a cultural capital that can be used especially in circumstances, such as refugee arrivals, when they have strategic access to the reality on the ground. This, though, seems to be the case of countries, like Germany and the UK, where NGOs appear to enjoy some degree of institutionalisation, or their dimension and range of activities make them important actors in the public sphere. In other contexts, different strategies have to be employed.

In Hungary, some independent organisations decided to radicalise their communication in order to be covered by the media, breaking the silence by which they are usually surrounded. In Italy, in the Sea Watch 3 forbidden landing, Carola Rackete could contend the stage with Salvini thanks to: a very active social media communication, that was replicated by her sympathisers; the newsworthy impact of her challenge to the Minister of the Interior – a novel happening that galvanised human rights activists and gave the NGO the protagonist role in mainstream media; and the novelty and appeal of her same character, a tiny woman in a ‘man’s role’ challenging the powerful “Minister of evil” and its policy of closed ports. Civil society organised protests also have an eventfulness and effervescence that fits the media logic triggering a fruitful interaction off- and on-line, but without a coordinated campaign their effects are short lived.

As for migrants and asylum seekers, their access to the resources necessary to advance their narratives is rather limited. This is especially the case of refugees on the move, who do not have connections with mainstream media, may be difficult to reach, sure do not have press offices, and often do not even speak the language. However, this is also mainly true for the established immigrant population, who lacks part of these resources, in terms of time and finance too, and in later immigration countries has no recognised community leaders that can play the speaker role.

Another hindrance for the expression of migrants’ point of view is journalists’ professional culture, according to which they are not reliable enough – as opposed to established organisations, whose authority is rarely put into question. “The journalists from traditional media interviewed shared the point of view that [...] telling successful stories from the perspective of established media requires stories by credible, relatable, emphatic sources linked to but not affected by the crisis or catastrophe, whereas its victims need to be given a ‘face’ but not necessarily a ‘voice’” (Rheindorf and Vollmer 2023). When a face is even given, as we have seen, this is rarely an individualising portrait, which can communicate emotions and humanity. In part this is the consequence of a politics of representation that considers people on the move as “floods” and “storms” rather than individuals with their own, specific, stories. For another part, apparently, this has to do with the necessity to avoid vulnerable people’s identification, as a British journalist pointed out (UK_I_1, cit. in Smellie 2023).

Ways to attain cultural authority, as with official associations, political or religious leaders, a well-known professional identity, are not available to refugees and to a certain extent, especially in some countries, also to established immigrants. Public protests can help reaching the public stage, but when their message is radically critical of the policies of the host country they are silenced or hardly tolerated. This is the fate of who does not “belong”.

3.4 Where: differences between news outlets and flows across platforms

Distinct types of narratives are not only shaped by different kinds of primary definers and conveyed to the media, which in turn reshape and distribute them. They also differ according to the venues in which they appear and from which they spread. While we have already seen some cases of dissemination from one source, or news organisation, to the others, here the focus is on patterns of narrative differentiation and distribution. In particular, what changes when political orientation, market segment, or media platform varies? In other words, do narratives appearing in news organisations of different political leanings, in tabloids or broadsheets, on television, or on social media reveal any peculiarity? And what are the routes of narrative propagation between traditional and social media? How do old and new media reflect in each other's discourse and with which consequences for the dissemination of new narratives and frames?

a) Variation in mainstream media

Political orientation

When it comes to political leaning, we expect, and research repeatedly confirms, that it has a strong influence on the type of narratives on migration that media organisations spread. They speak to a particular public, promote particular values, and pursue particular interests, which reflect on the way a story is told and storytellers (both sources and journalists) are selected or socialised to the profession.

In our case studies, a clear pattern of political affinity was found between the voices reported and the political orientation of a given media organisation, extending to how favourably or unfavourably they were presented. It is no surprise, then, that also narratives followed a similar pattern of political compatibility, although one with some episodic exceptions.

Right-wing, and to a slightly lesser extent, conservative newspapers privileged the master frames of threat or risk in refugee arrivals and debates on rights, and strategic frames in explanations of terror attacks, linking them to “out-of-control” immigration and “culturally incompatible” Islam. When it came to solution frames, they gave more space or endorsed Them-oriented, restrictive or repressive, ones. The media in this political field oscillated between exclusionary overtones and stigmatising language, and right-wing newspapers, in particular, were very present in debates on rights, campaigning more than reporting.

Conversely, the progressive and liberal media organisations were more prone to victim and white saviours frames, but also to the hybrid rationality frame. While endorsing both tactic and strategic explanations of terror attacks, they were careful not to blatantly link them to religion or immigration. In terms of solutions, they favoured Us-oriented and technocratic ones. Their language was more guarded and respectful. In a few cases, they even gave the voice to migrants – and even more to NGOs and civil society organisations and movements.

Centrist newspapers and most TVs were, as we can expect, somehow in between, leaning towards one side or the other according to the specific event and the country. Differences

between TV news were quite less pronounced than between newspapers. Needing to reach a wide audience and being more into reporting than commentary, broadcasted TV stations tended to be more moderate and similar between them. However, this is only a general pattern and there are exceptions. One is the conservative, sensationalist, and privately owned *Antena 3* in Spain, and the other is the government-controlled news channel of the public service *M1* in Hungary, which were more keen in hosting anti-immigrant narratives. If we had not chosen to study the public and private channels with the highest audience, the results would have been different though, because channels that target more specific publics can behave very differently.

Market segmentation

There is a general consensus on the fact that while quality media, or broadsheet newspapers, tend to focus on politics and policies, or the economy, and in general on news deemed of societal relevance, tabloids tend to put the spotlight on sports, celebrities, scandals, or crime, blurring the distinction between public and private sphere, favouring sensationalism and a subjective, more than objective, reporting from the perspective of 'ordinary people' (Fiske 1992; Reinemann et al. 2012). Given this orientation and today's purchase of xenophobic views on lower classes, tabloids are said to contribute to hostility towards migrants and refugees, recurring to stereotyped portrayals and negative language and privileging criminality frames (Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017; Eberl et al. 2018).

Among the countries considered in this report, only German and UK markets are segmented along the tabloid/broadsheet dimension. In both countries, the tabloids considered (*the Daily Mail* and *die Bild*) tended to sensationalise, for example with questions about how many potential terrorists stayed in Germany despite their asylum applications having been denied, evoking emotions of fear and uncertainty. Apart from speculation, the German tabloid tended, more than broadsheets, to establish a link between terror and Muslims and to exaggerate in the representation of heroes and foes, also drawing more sweeping conclusions. In the UK, the *Daily Mail* emerged with its dehumanising language, the 'invasion' narrative and metaphors such as "The swarm on our streets", with which it headlined in block capitals its front page on 31 July 2015.

Nevertheless, the predilection of tabloids for human interest stories and framing can lead to unexpected outcomes, such as the adoption of a highly emotive humanitarian frame (Figenshou 2015). In Germany, on the occasion of the Berlin market terror attack, while so-called "quality media" were more focused on the investigation, police measures, solidarity, and debate, tabloids highlighted emotions and focused on the family background of the victims. Yet emphasising with the victims can be a wider attitude that does not limit itself to co-nationals. In reporting the burning of Moria, *Bild* remained more focused on human suffering over time than other newspapers, giving a face, albeit a white one (the "blonde Syrian girl"), to the humanitarian catastrophe. The same newspaper was also committed to the white saviour master frame, asserting that Germany should help, children in particular. "Nevertheless, tabloids placed blame and responsibility elsewhere, most prominently blaming the Greek authorities, Brussels (meaning the EU in some sense) and, in the late stages of our time window, the migrant protestors and alleged arsonists" (Rheindorf and Vollmer 2023; for the weight put on international conflict, see also Vincze, Meza, and Balaban 2021). Similarly,

during the “Windrush scandal” the coverage in the Daily Mail was overwhelmingly critical of the government and supportive of the victims.

Paper and electronic media

It has been maintained that television news tend to portray migration much more negatively than print news (Eberl et al. 2018). As TV news is more event oriented and short-term focused than newspapers and must report a story using appealing visuals, it prefers dramatic stories (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). Television is thus considered more likely than newspapers to focus on (weak) border control, as this kind of reporting provides vivid images of illegal border crossing (Kim et al. 2011).

Nevertheless, vivid visuals do not necessarily enforce security framing, as also images of suffering and victimisation can achieve the same effect. In France and in Spain (but not in Italy) Tv news reports tended to use an emotional tone with dramatic background music talking of refugee arrivals. Emotions were widespread also in reports of terror attacks. In the portrayal of both national and foreign victims, the space given to death, suffering, mourning, personal dramas and human stories was particularly generous, while root causes and migration policies were neglected. This emotional reporting involved also citizens’ feelings, including fear.

However, fear was not particularly exploited, probably because of the moderate political leaning of most TV channels considered and their mainstream attitude. As a member from the Information Department of France 2 put it,

“Immigration often gives rise to images that are anxiety-provoking. But contrary to what many people think, we are not looking for anxiety. If we did, we would get lower ratings. [...] We need so many people, we are so unifying that we work on a lowest common ideological denominator to try to unite as many people as possible, and so we avoid shocking and dividing as much as possible.” (FR_I_6, cit. in Moncada 2023)

As TV news programmes left mainly to politicians the production of arguments (while newspapers did more editorialising) they hosted hostile language as well. Yet, at least in our sample, newspapers and Twitter delivered most of it.

b) The specificity of social media

Social media are often considered the place where the worst expressions of human instincts, the “gut of the country”, come to light, in particular when it comes to immigration and asylum. In our case studies, indeed, many tweets were extremely violent and dominated by hatred or fear, calling for the killing of migrants, expressing humour or satisfaction regarding their death and hatred towards migrants’ ‘accomplices’, and using racist slurs. Apart from these extremes, the expression of far-right ideas and sentiments was quite more frequent on Twitter than in traditional media. This primacy could be explained by the fact that we had very few newspapers or TVs with such political positions in our sample, but there is more to it, as we will see below. As a matter of fact, extreme-right politicians and supporters were a constant presence on Twitter – but not on Facebook in Hungary, where the utility of social media for the government propaganda would be discovered later (Bognár et al. 2023). In France, but in a few case

studies also in Spain and Italy, messages radically in the threat master frame were in the majority.

Messages in the humanitarian or the white saviour master frames were very numerous as well. Indeed, they were prevalent in a higher number of case studies as compared to messages in the threat frame, and in several instances they outpaced similar frames in traditional media. Some condemned racism, others the inhuman actions or statements on the part of the government, many were proud of humanitarian actions or expressed sympathy and solidarity to refugees and migrant communities. Therefore, more than xenophobia, what characterises social media is polarisation. Neutral comments were extremely rare, and negative comments blaming the opponent side – be it the government, the opposition, foreign countries, other comments, traditional media – were far more numerous than positive ones addressed at allies.

This polarisation in part reflects a profound divide in politics and the wider society, but it is enhanced by algorithms. So-called vanity metrics (number of retweets, likes, etc.) are at the base of visibility and influence on social media (Venturini 2019). This brings not only laypeople, but also the media and especially politicians to improve the shareability of their content (on shareability as a news-value, see Harcup and O'Neill 2017), made possible by the use of high arousal emotions (Berger and Milkman 2012). Judicious, thoughtful, nuanced messages do not go far. Many of the most widely shared messages in our sample expressed outrage, which could favour narratives of many kinds, provided they included a target to blame.

However, especially in the follow up of terror attacks, Twitter did not only provide a forum for political contestation. For example, it was used by official bodies and journalists to live report on the events. Above all, in those difficult moments the platform became a service tool to share information on missing people, to reunite family members and friends in the immediate aftermath of the assault, to discuss how to respond to the strike as a society, and to concretely coordinate rallies and demonstrations.

This communitarian function brought Papacharissi to describe Twitter as an “infrastructure of civic engagement”, whose choral flow of repetitive, cumulative and amplified expression of affect allows the public to “feel their way into the story” (Papacharissi 2016,12). These structures of feeling, activated by retweeting, allow “thought leaders to be crowdsourced to prominence” (Papacharissi 2016, 7).

Despite the undeniable deep involvement of many individuals and the sharing of participation and affect allowed by the social network structure, this participation did not last and most of the conversation was enclosed in separate bubbles whose reciprocal references took the form of a flame war. In the words of one activist:

You can't make real lasting movements with Twitter and Tiktok because everything is too fast, chaotic, swirling. Everything comes and goes. Everything goes out of fashion in a matter of days, even hours. No sowing and no reaping. In addition to the fact that it cannot be a public sphere because there is no possibility of a real discussion, you don't discuss on Twitter, you slash each other, you insult each other immediately, you read quickly [...] There is only a fucking algorithmic madness that leaves nothing. You can't build, you can't sediment, you can't structure, you can't organize. I mean, you can mobilize [...] to make mass on the moment, we all go to ... [...] I name them all, it's not a

specific problem of Twitter, it's that they are programmed, engineered to work in that way. [...] [Messages on Twitter] remained there, they were immanent to the logic of the medium, they remained confined to the medium. (IT_I_10, cit. in Maneri et al. 2023)

In the opinion of this activist, who later abandoned Twitter, transience, non-dialogicality, and insularity thus seem to be the major limitations of the platform in the dissemination of alternative ways to tell migration. In the following section, Twitter ability to propagate narratives is assessed further.

c) The flows of narratives across platforms

At first glance, social and mainstream media may seem to take parallel avenues. Most of the voices are different and those who dominate the debate in newspapers and TVs are rarely the same who produce the most engagement on Twitter. The balance of the various narratives and frames is not the same. For example, on social media, we rarely see messages about law making, but human rights and law and order are way more present. In addition, social media users tend to talk especially of the most extreme episodes and utterances. On top of that, the very functions of old media and new platforms are different, and so the amount and quality of the emotions involved.

That being said, traditional and social media influence each other in several ways. Looking at the numbers, the influence goes mainly in one direction. As seen in Table 8, traditional media and journalists' accounts were responsible for about one third of the top 100 most engaging messages overall, to which we should add media content linked by individual users. This means that social media discourse was directly sourced from traditional media for an important share, inside which stands out the presence of a conspicuous number of far-right news websites and newspapers. The opposite did not happen, at least in the same proportion. The number of quotations of social media content in traditional media was often much lower. On top of that, these quotations are often less relevant since, in a news story, one or more quotes among many others are just part of the whole, whereas, on social media, a message coming from a media account or linking entirely to a news-story is the whole thing. Most importantly, the social media messages quoted by newspapers and TVs came mainly from politicians and personalities already accredited in the mainstream media. Far from crowdsourced thought leaders, what arrives to mainstream media are mainly its own champions. Finally, not only cross quotations and voices, but also cycles of attention go hand in hand or, better, from one hand to the other. While a spike in social media interest on a certain topic may sometimes result in a news story, the whole cycle of attention on social media was a consequence of newspapers and televisions intensified coverage on the event we studied.

Traditional media remediation on Twitter

All of this should be no surprise. While the media is all about reporting, adding context, reaction, and commentary, social media, and Twitter in particular, is a place devoted primarily to commentary. At a closer look, if we exclude a few updates posted by media accounts or the press offices of NGOs and law enforcement agencies, the conversation on Twitter was a commentary on: a) the events, learned from breaking news; b) the political reactions that the events solicited, spread via Twitter and more often via mainstream media; and c) other comments made by everyday people and journalists, on social media or else. In other words,

Twitter lives on news and reactions to the news acquired from the news media. This has consequences on its users ability to impose their own narratives and frames, as they are mostly commenting on stories already told and framed by off-line media.

However, the possibilities of crowdsourced framing are still there. On Twitter and Facebook news-media contents are, on the one hand, echoed, with links, summaries, or mentions. Some messages simply reflect the traditional media narratives, even if inflecting them with passions often increasing their emotive appeal. Especially in the occasion of terror attacks, politicians and media calls for and expressions of solidarity were replicated and endorsed on social media. Otherwise news-media contents are more thoroughly remediating (Bolter and Grusin 1999; Conway-Silva et al. 2018), that is, are represented 'in translation', becoming the excuse for a new discourse, or re-combined in the new medium. This can be done with memes, photo collages, or videos, but above all with comments. Whatever the tool, these various forms of commentary often rejected the narratives, the premises, the conclusions, or the emotions conveyed by traditional media and politicians. In general, when counted, negative comments expressing outrage, anger, sarcasm, or irony were much more numerous than positive comments.

Does this amount to an independent framing? There have been cases of "networked framing" (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013) where the persistent revision and rearticulation of traditional media dominant frames was massive. In Hungary, the biased questions, non-scientific administration, and propagandist aim of the government's national consultation on "Immigration and terrorism" were exposed successfully on Facebook, with the important contribution of online newspapers and against the dominant framing of pro-government media, which were scarcely visible on the platform. In Italy, a determined civil reaction underlying the fascist and racist nature and the political complicity with the supremacist shooting spree in Macerata did what in mainstream media could hardly be found. Apart from these two cases, alternative framing regarded just a small set of messages, strongly polarised into opposing camps.

Twitter remediation in traditional media

Remediation, and re-framing, works also the other way around. As already mentioned, the way newspapers and Tv news represent what is going on in social media is selective, in terms of voices and contents, and filtered by their own news values. They select the tweets of political actors and a few celebrities, screenshotted or filmed in order to convey the immediacy and vividness of their messages. Everyday people with or without citizenship, NGOs, and civil society organisations and movements, that is, marginal voices, are instead ignored, unless they perform one of the following roles: they symbolise the national community hurt by the terrorist attack; stage protests in the streets; are protagonists of high-stake confrontations – as in the case of the tweets written by Sea Watch during its dramatic challenge to disembark refugees, which had their part in defining the narrative; or are seen as instances of hate speech.

For the sake of completeness, there have been a few cases of liberal media reporting tweets written by unknown individuals without the bonus of showing newsworthy hate speech, as it happened with *El Pais* in Spain, but these are rare exceptions to the rule. Another commonly discussed situation is when the media do "story mining", looking for good stories to pick up

from social networks. The story of the Red Cross volunteer, Luna, portrayed while embracing an exhausted young refugee in Ceuta, for example, unfolded first in the social media and was then taken up by the press, appealed by the iconic value of this “anonymous hero”. In Hungary, Facebook pages were used to find information on the main characters in the case of the tripped refugee, and there was some coverage of Facebook groups set up in reaction to the event. Yet, apart from exploiting iconic images, digging for personal information, or generic reports of turbulence in the social media sphere, we did not find new frames being picked up by newspapers or TV.

Even in rare cases when a civil reaction proposing an alternative networked framing was dominating the social media, as was the case in one occasion in Hungary and Italy respectively, this went unnoticed in mainstream media, whereas minoritarian hate speech was commented in the press and on TV in that same case in Italy. In general, only messages with the highest engagement, which usually means the most polarising ones, are noticed. In Germany, where the conversation on the Integration law on Twitter was scarcely polarising, the press did not report on anything happening on the platform: “the lower the polarisation, the less interesting are social media to traditional media” (Rheindorf and Vollmer 2023).

News values play a role here. Hate speech is newsworthy, since it represents atypical behaviour (even in social networks), negativity, and consonance with the stereotype of social media as the slums of the public sphere. As a journalist put it,

It's not that it makes news, it is the news. [...] Even if you were right, [...] that one third were, how should I put it, sympathetic to an attacker and two thirds were not, that third seems to me to be the news, because in a normal world, I won't say 100%, but 98% would have to say 'lock up this criminal'. (IT_I_6, cit. in Maneri et al. 2023)

Even if these appear to be reasonable considerations, this representation of Twitter ends up transmitting an idea of society at large as intolerant or racist, influencing political representatives' idea of public opinion, to the point of leading them to abandon policies that qualify them as “friend of migrants”.

In Germany one journalist declared that he restrained from reporting hate speech directly, in order not to give it more space. This does not mean the influence of hate speech is annihilated:

even if we did not report on social media hate speech directly, because we didn't want to give it more space, this also then motivated stories about communities officially distancing themselves or marching in solidarity with the victims and the like. (DE_I_10, cit. in Rheindorf and Vollmer 2023)

The scripted role for minority communities, reported almost only when distancing themselves from terror attacks, seems in this case the other mainstream answer to hate speech online.

To conclude this discussion about reciprocal flows and remediations between online and offline narratives, social media are heavily exposed to the frames elaborated by traditional media and their accredited sources. Still, they are a venue for the expression of unrestrained criticism. In rare cases this amount to the elaboration of an alternative, networked framing, but much more often it ends up in flame wars over identity and rights. What arrives to the still highly influential

traditional media, though, is heavily filtered by their own news values and hierarchy of access, so that only rarely can marginalised voices have an impact on the storytelling on migration outside of scripted roles as protesters, hate speakers, or potential threats in denial.

4. Conclusion

Mass-mediated narratives are probably the most compelling way to naturalise a certain cognitive and emotional landscape of migration. In this long examination of narratives, frames, and master frames used to talk about migration in 17 case studies across three sub-genres, we have shown how narratives and frames occur in certain patterns. In particular, the various sub-genres function as narrative engines and also as structures of opportunity of which competing storytellers seek to take advantage. In the first part of this conclusion, I summarise the main patterns that distinguish the three sub-genres considered. In the second part, I move from this picture of structured narrative variation to the strategies, prospects and constraints that characterise the when, what, who, and where of narratives as a process. Finally, starting with some annotations on the factors conditioning national variations in the production of immigration narratives, I hint at promising avenues for comparative research.

4.1 Sub-genres and narrative patterns

Refugee arrivals

News on refugee arrivals are probably the type of migration-related event most studied in media scholarship. Our findings confirm the dominant frames that have been found to characterise their media representation (Table 4). Nonetheless, the inclusion of social media, the comparison with other sub-genres and between master frames, and the close look at narratives allow to say something more.

To start with, social media presented a narrower array of frames than traditional media. Frames on Twitter were hardly new, but the balance was different and focused especially on responsibilities and blame. Overall, problem frames were much more common than benefit frames, as we could expect in news about dramatic events. The threat master frame dominated, especially in France and the UK, despite the smaller numbers of arrivals if compared to other countries. Hybrid frames, distancing from arguments about human rights while at the same time refusing to endorse the threat frame, were also common, especially in countries not affected by a strong political polarisation on the issue, where they seemed to represent the new consensus. The victim master frame was also popular and in a very few cases dominant, especially if the crisis was *there* and not *here*, in which case the emphasis was on disruption, threat, and its necessary containment. In contrast, no *black/brown hero* master frame was adopted by the media. The economy was a ground for interpretation only in the *threat* master frame, as if no positive economic consequence of refugee arrivals could be predicted.

The same narratives on root causes and solutions free-floated across frames (but generally not across master frames) revealing their nature as pre-packaged, all-purpose arguments.

Refugees were the story protagonists in a minority of cases. When represented, they often appeared as out-of-control masses or groups of people, caught from a distance. They either played the role of active subjects involved in negative behaviour or of passive victims. A racialisation of Us and Them was evident in a few cases with the selective use of pictures to portray humanity and solicit empathy. Metaphors of disastrous natural phenomena, war, violation of the border, and biblical nemesis were frequent especially on British tabloids and in UK political discourse.

All in all, the stake in narratives about refugee arrivals, given the suffering in play, is that of getting rid of guilt projecting blame on others (political adversaries, NGOs, smugglers, or migrants themselves). This moral tension offers political opportunities positioning oneself as the saviour of refugees, but only when they are far away, or (much more often) as the defender against the intruders.

Debates on migrant rights

News covering debates on migrants' rights were rather similar in the composition of frames to those in the previous sub-genre, but the balance between master frames was distinct (see Table 5). Much less news saw people with a foreign background as victims and much more as beneficiaries of white providers, despite the fact that most debates started from the implementation or the proposal of restrictive measures. European media and politics thus seem unable or unwilling to consider the negative consequences of proposed (restrictive) laws and decrees on migrant rights. The black/brown hero master frame was used only in relation to migrants' contribution to the economy, while nativist and especially cultural framings drew boundaries of belonging that were in some countries the main angle given to the issue. Even in the positive white provider master frame, cultural framing focused on assimilation or tolerance, seen as goals or as already existing realities, thus implying a negative evaluation of cultural diversity.

Hybrid frames were not only present again, but more articulated, in ways that seek to reconcile demands for control with real or claimed benefits for migrants. The same subjects were often portrayed as simultaneously victims and culprits. An implicit intersection of origin, religion, and gender was used to revisit the tried and tested theme of the threat posed by male (Muslim) immigrants to white women and the European fundamental value of gender equality.

What is at stake in debates on rights, geared towards a means-ends logic, is the recognition of one's principles, realism, reason, and foresight. The political game is exposing the other party's unreasonable, unjust, or dangerous policies and proposals. Not being based on high-profile events and consequences that dictate the topics to be covered, debates are receptive to public initiatives promoted by the media, politicians, or activists giving birth to narratives that can change the direction of the conversation. Another consequence of their scarce eventfulness is that, freed from the constraints of the chronicle of events on the ground, the space is open to caricatured reinterpretations of mythical stories from the past or ghostly projections of the future.

Terror attacks

In the coverage of terror attacks, the structure of frames is totally different (see Table 6). Frames regard the impact – especially focusing on suffering, threat, mourning – the attempt at making sense of the catastrophe – with explanation and responsibility frames – and the overcoming of trauma and prevention of similar episodes – with reaction and solution frames. Both in explanation/responsibility and in reaction/solution frames we see a main divide. Among explanations, the contrast is between tactic frames on the one hand, which make sense of the specific incident but not of the overall phenomenon of terror attacks, for example delivering circumstantial or psychological explanations; and strategic frames on the other hand, evoking cultural, social, or migratory causes, thus making an explicit or implicit link between the catastrophe and a general issue related to immigration. Among solutions, the opposition is between Us-oriented frames, magnifying or promoting cooperation, solidarity, and heroism at the service of the community, and Them-oriented frames, concentrating on ways to police, restrict, or repress the breeding broth of the attacker. In jihadist terror attacks, strategic explanations and Them-oriented solutions go hand in hand, are in tune with the dominant security paradigm (Huysmans 2000; Bigo 2005) and are the frames of choice of right-wing politicians, newspapers, and social media users. Moderate or liberal politicians and newspapers tend instead to balance tactic and strategic explanation frames and Us- and Them-oriented solutions.

Autochthonous victims allow for emotions of fear, empathy, and grief being put centre-stage. These victims reflect into the broader society, represented as a united and solidaristic community. Assailants are instead otherised and represented as emotionless creatures, involved in doing and choosing to commit violence. In the only case of a supremacist terror attack, however, we witness a denial of the terror qualification and a reversed representation. The autochthonous aggressor is fully humanised, while the victims with a migrant background are instead ignored and reflect onto a voiceless, ghostly collective of “illegal immigrants”. Tactic explanation frames (madness, personal issues) are unusually widespread, and both strategic explanation frames and solution frames target the community of victims. This contrast provides the most overwhelming evidence of a symbolic division between Us and Them that follows and guards the boundary of citizenship and racialization.

When they are defined as such, what is at stake in the aftermath of terror attacks, which disrupt normality violating the intangibility of the territory, is the re-establishment of symbolic order. A common reaction is the reaffirmation of the national ideal, contrasting it to the counter-identity of the enemy and embracing master narratives of the nation’s values that reproduce its cultural identity. Such exceptional, dramatic, and historically momentous incidents trigger emotive resonance that make narratives that originate in that context powerful symbols at disposal of storytellers in other times, places, and sub-genres

4.2 The process towards narrative success

When

Despite the fact that the conditions of narrative production and circulation are clearly determined by structured relations of power, circumstances proved to be an important factor. They can restrict the path or open new avenues for storytelling. A crisis, catching institutions by surprise, can give way to new and transformative narratives. In our examination, however, more often it did not. The unexpectedness and disruption that are apparent constitutive features of arrivals and terror attacks, on balance, were not enough to put an unprepared government in the pillory. Terror attacks reinforce the incumbent government elevating it to the role of protector of its citizens in the face of an enemy that has gone to great lengths to show its evil face. In refugee arrivals, following the mantra of “controlling immigration” is a proven recipe for shielding oneself from radical criticism, and suitable enemies on which to discharge blame are not difficult to be found. Both situations are fertile ground for narratives that fit into already dominant master frames, while debates on rights are more open in this respect.

The most common narrative changers – although not always transformative – proved to be not crises, but actors’ agency. Political statements, decisions on the part of governments and judicial bodies, media deliberate activation, and even powerless actors, when they took to the streets or acted in a way that challenged the state of things, could steer the course of narratives in other directions. Two other important factors that facilitated new narratives – in this case transformative – were the novelty of the event (as in the case of the tripped refugee in Hungary), which could challenge the usual rhetorical arsenal of the dominant storytelling, and the originality of a previously silenced point of view (as in the case of the “Windrush scandal”). However, frame reversal (where the incident is retold with opposite implications) and frame crystallisation (a new synthesis that allows to go on with business as usual) are just around the corner, possibly taking storytelling back to the ‘right’ direction.

What

To be effective, a narrative must have a contextual appeal – not all places and moments are equal – a cognitive, and a normative appeal. A plot with clearly positioned characters going through interrelated events conveys ideas of causality and allocates the roles of hero, villain, victim, and other positions, in turn providing a take-home moral message.

Strange as it may seem at first glance, the best opportunities to propose effective narratives to the media in order to advance one's vision of the world, or at least of immigration, are not found when their production is more lively and compelling. Terror attacks, and to a lesser extent refugee arrivals, already deliver well-formed storytelling, with thrilling and live plots, clearly defined roles, possibility of identification with heroes and foes, and cascades of emotions. The big story is already there, and attempts at introducing one's narrative are difficult to pursue.

On the contrary, debates on rights, where there is no unfolding plot, events on the ground are scarce and hardly newsworthy, and Manichean roles are not established in advance, are a perfect land of conquest. Storytellers that propose a straightforward, univocal, and repeated compelling narrative obtain wide circulation. One of most successful drivers of circulation in

our case studies was symbolisation, with its capability to conflate complex and maybe unrelated meanings in a portable word or image.

Who

As it is well-known, news media have a stringent hierarchy of access that determines who can play the role of storyteller. This order is so effective that the people who were, by definition, protagonists of the events we studied (i.e. migrants themselves) were very rarely their narrators, especially when it came to expressing opinions. Apart from journalists, it was politicians who acted as main disseminators of narratives, often providing the vocabulary to speak about migration.

Social media hosted a different and more diverse range of voices and perspectives that would otherwise be poorly represented. Activists and celebrities, on the whole, had high engagement while migrants were once more almost absent. Politicians' presence was of course prominent but not at all dominant, while mainstream media were one of the most retweeted or linked voices also on social media. On both traditional and social media, male voices were far more present, with exceptions, such as the scripted role as emotion bearers reserved for women on French TV (and possibly others) during terrorist strikes.

If, from access, we shift the focus to strategies, we see that behaviour changes according to political positions. Right-wing political leaders investment on issues related to immigration was clear and sound, with their massive presence across mainstream media and platforms and long-term persistence in the discussion over each issue. Yet in front of these political entrepreneurs of (in)security we seldom found equally determined "political entrepreneurs of rights".

The communicative strategies of the former were always the same, a sort of ready-made package complete with instructions for use: careful organisation and funding; coherence and simplicity of the message; "phygital" activism coordinating physical actions and digital activism; and spontaneous creation of new events to feed the media with the right narratives. Some of these strategies have been adopted by migrants' 'ventriloquists' such as NGOs, if with far less resources (see also Güell 2023; Pogliano and Frisina 2023; Rheindorf 2023). As for migrants themselves, and especially people on the move, they cannot even imagine similar possibilities. On top of that, journalists tend to consider victims of dramatic events not reliable enough and to rely instead on established organisations and institutions.

Where

Different venues varied both in the kind of narratives they conveyed and in the way each platform remediated the content of the other. In brief, the main factor affecting the narratives and frames being amplified by newspapers was political orientation. Market segmentation played a role as well. Tabloids, whose notorious tendency to sensationalism and populism was at times behind the use of stigmatising language and caricatural images of threat, could be also more prone to the adoption of highly emotive humanitarian frames for reasons related again to their purported stance on the part of the people. Tv news were more similar across channels than newspapers, and particularly versed into emotive reporting. Finally Twitter, more than the reserve of xenophobia and conspiracy theories, as it is generally represented,

appeared as a very polarised site of political contestation, where messages arousing high-activation passions, be they anti- or 'pro-immigrant', were favoured by algorithmic selection.

What was the remediation of this political questioning outside the boundaries of the platform? In general, while social media remediation of mainstream media content was a contentious if often ironical rebuttal of their premises, conclusions, or emotions – or alternatively a simple replication of their narratives – traditional media remediated social networks content according to their own news values and hierarchy of access. They picked up an iconic story; they quoted political actors and a few celebrities; and they even reported about everyday people's messages, when they embodied the national community reacting in solidarity to a terrorist attack, they rallied in the streets, or they indulged in hate speech. Outside these scripted roles, marginalised voices did not have an impact on the storytelling on migration. Even when, in a couple of cases, users on Twitter and Facebook coalesced into a grassroots networked framing, collectively telling their version of the story, they were ignored by traditional media.

4.3 This far, then what?

The studies on which this comparative report is based were focused on narratives and the media. As a consequence, when considering narrative success, we could examine in detail the indicators of story pervasiveness, that is, of the "capacity of a certain migration narrative to colonise the communication sphere where (and for which) it was originated and eventually to spill over to other spheres" (Garcés-Mascareñas and Pastore 2022, 7). In this sense, we have given evidence of the migration of narratives from one sub-genre to another, their similarity and probable circulation between countries, the spread between different news outlets, the transitions between the political, civic, and media spheres, and the spillover from one platform to another. Additional research may go further in the investigation of any of these paths of dissemination.

Yet our focus and methodology is less apt at accounting for transformativity, that is to say "a given narrative's capacity, independently from its sheer diffusion, to actually shape attitudes or behaviours, at the individual or collective level" (Garcés-Mascareñas and Pastore 2022, 7). Were viral narratives persuasive, in the sense they shaped beliefs and attitudes? Did they conduce to action, informing decisions and behaviours? We just drew some impressions. For sure, some words and symbols coined by politicians brought specific connotations to a wide audience, presumably influencing attitudes and beliefs, as was the case for MENAS in Spain. Opinions polls have been said by some interviewees to reflect the prevalent narratives of some of our case studies, moving public opinion to the right. But we did not collect data to prove it and this is a very delicate methodological endeavour, as it is to assess whether election turnout was actually influenced by similar debates – although right-wing or conservative coalitions actually won the elections when they took place right after the events we studied – or if apparently increasing attacks on reception centres were the result of Vox campaign on MENA. What we can say for sure is that while the conduciveness to action of opposition parties' narratives can be limited by their limited power, the impact of several government narratives is guaranteed. This has to do neither with pervasiveness nor with transformativity, but rather with legitimisation: narratives promoted by governments do not need to shape other actors' beliefs or behaviour, as long as they support and justify their policies on migration, whether the public or the opposition is persuaded or not.

a) How to account for national variation

Narratives on migration were at the same time similar and divergent across countries. Of course, variation is largely due to the singularity of the case studies considered. Even with events belonging to the same sub-genres, the factors that may bring narratives in one direction or the other are numerous, as documented especially in Section 3.1. Nevertheless, some national variations seemed to hint at more profound differences that regard the shadow of each country's past into the present, which could be investigated with *ad hoc* research designs.

'Old' and 'new' destination countries

A first dimension to be considered is the history of immigration. The countries examined in this report differed in this respect. We studied 'old' destinations – as in the case of France, Germany, and the UK – 'new' destinations – as for Italy and Spain – and 'no destination' countries, which is substantially the case of Hungary. Bennett et al. (2012) underlined how the use of migrants, refugees, and minorities with a foreign background as sources, and the quotation of their point of view, can be a challenge in new immigration countries. Due to linguistic difficulties, journalists' lack of specialization on the topic, immigrant communities' weak organisation, and scarce media professionals' awareness about non-offensive and unbiased coverage, the media in these countries would be more reliant on official suppliers of information.

Yet these conclusions, drawn from journalists' opinions, are supported by our case studies only for a small part. In the case of refugee arrivals, interviewing people who are vulnerable, do not speak the language, do not have representatives and pre-existing contacts with journalists' is a challenge in every country. In news on terror attacks, the need to delve into the past and the personality of the attackers urged journalists to do their best to listen to the testimonies of their acquaintances and relatives, and Muslim associations were given voice to distance themselves from jihadism, regardless of the condition of 'old' or 'new' immigration country. In the case of debates on rights, however, and possibly in other subgenres involving the domestic minority population, the lower institutionalization of minority associations, journalists' lack of contacts, and language barriers may have more importance in migrants' under-representation. Yet again, only in the case of the "Windrush scandal" the voice of people with a foreign background was prominent, but this had to do with a specific editorial choice more than with the country being an old destination of immigration.

ImagiNation

In his essay on "banal nationalism", Billig (1995) illustrated how in nation states there is a continual, routine, and unnoticed reminding of nationhood. We are "flagged" with countless banal and often implicit messages about our place among other nations. However, while nation and nationalism is a common reality in Europe, ideas of the nation are not the same. When it comes to immigration, how we – and what is more relevant, politicians and journalists – imagine the nation is under the imprint, or in dialogue, with selective popularisations of history (Bertossi, Duyvendak, and Foner 2021) and with debates and conflicts about citizenship, integration, identity, and belonging with more or less deep roots in the past.

This has consequences on telling migration, as “how we define We is very important when defining Them”.¹⁶ Ideas of belonging are not only embedded in straightforward master narratives, but also in more complex “cultural repertoires”, that is, central historical themes shaping what are deemed society’s national values and beliefs (Lamont et al. 2016). This is not the place, nor do we have the evidence, for a systematic examination of the relationship between these different imagiNations¹⁷ and narratives on migration. Our choice of case studies could be responsible for some of the discrepancies. Nonetheless, a certain imprint seemed to resonate in the peculiarities we found in the way migration was told in the different countries and future research could fill the gap.

France is probably the country in which the national debate about integration and citizenship has been more prominent, hot, and influential. In extreme synthesis, the dominant national consensus is that newcomers can and should embrace nationality, moulding their cultural beliefs and practices to the French universalist institutional structure keeping away from dangerous ‘ethnic’ “*communautarisme*”. This goes hand in hand with the emphasis on the separation of public and private and state and religion (Favell 2022). In news on the debate on Burkini and on the terror attack, the striking abundance of harsh tones, stigmatising language and narratives in the threat master frame had probably much to do with the long streak of terror attacks and the temporal proximity of that debate to one of these strikes – as well as with a strong and active xenophobic political right. Yet the abundance of references to lack of integration, Muslims’ incompatibility to French society, and narratives in the cultural frame, with recurring terms as “mosques”, any kind of religious garment, “communitarianism”, “multiculturalism”, “*métissage*”, “secession”, “separatism”, “*défrancisation*” as opposed to others equally frequent such as “cohabitation”, “*republique*”, “civilisation”, “laicism”, “assimilation”, “cohesion”, and “*fonction publique*” sound as a direct reflection of the cultural wars that characterized the last decades. We find an essentialised culturalisation of universalism and *laïcité* that draws a boundary between those entitled to belong and those mired in their particularistic identity and cultural values (see also Bertossi 2016).

In the case of the UK, the history of the national conversation on citizenship and belonging is more complex. The notion of multiculturalism dominated the debate at least until the end of the past century, with a positive evaluation of diversity as such and of its compatibility with equality and unity, in a mutual recognition between diasporic communities and a cosmopolitan post-imperial state (Favell 2022). However, various factors of destabilization favoured a backlash in a conservative direction, under the additional pressure of radical Islam from one direction and UKIP from the other, a backlash that was exacerbated by the debate on Brexit that was raging just during the Eurotunnel crossings crisis. At this point, “immigration control (or the perception of a ‘loss of control’) is a pervasive narrative in the UK” (Smellie 2023). In the narratives of the three events studied in that country, we did not find cultural frames or even vocabulary that alluded to separatism, secularism or ‘de-English-sation’. What we found was an obsession with invasion that was reiterated with hyper-lexicalised metaphors of flood, war, and intrusion that stand out among other countries: “lay siege”, “trying to sneak”, “break in”, “raid”, “storm”, “tide”, “wave”, “pouring in”, “swarms”, and “hoards”.

¹⁶ Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas, personal communication.

¹⁷ I borrow this expression from Frosh and Wolfsfeld (2007).

The influence of long-term national conversations on citizenship in other countries was less evident. However, other master narratives about belonging, the position of the nation among other nations, and the essence of its fabric seemed equally influential.

In Italy the debate on integration and on citizenship has been far less elaborated, borrowing from abroad keywords like “multiculturalism” (but with no mutual recognition) and adopting the French model of integration (Carbone, Gargiulo, and Russo Spina 2018). However, the country seems still deeply under the imprint of the master narrative of Italy as a populous country of emigrants, projecting Italianness and its customs abroad through the settlement of its labour, thus leading to a resistance to accept the reverse, an inward population movement seen as endangerment to its perceived ethnic homogeneity. The traces of this ‘emigration paradigm’ – not that much out-of-time, if one thinks that the country has turned back to a negative net migration rate in recent years – cast a shadow on narratives of migration. If all European countries are traversed by nativist narratives reworking an imagined past and welding ideas of historical rooting and cultural authenticity (Bertossi, Duyvendak, and Foner 2021) the Italian re-elaboration seems particularly haunted by a nostalgia of a mythical ethnic homogeneity (for a supporting finding in opinion surveys see Bail 2008). In the context of the debate on citizenship reform that we investigated, assimilationist arguments in favour of a selection on the basis of shared culture and values and of the desire and pride to be truly Italian coexisted with “Italians first” slogans and with warnings about the risk of enlarging the number of Italian citizens with an “invasion from within”, implying an idea of Italianness as a matter of blood, which today’s Italians share with their fellows abroad more than with ‘newcomers’. This nativist framing was very prominent also in the reactions to the terror attack in Macerata, when empathy, grief, and emotions were distributed according to ideas of belonging.

Nativist ideas are not necessarily typical of countries with recent immigration. In Spain, indeed, until a few years ago there were no xenophobic parties. Another peculiarity are decade-long conflicts between central government and autonomist or independentist regions that have likely undermined ideas of national homeland (Zapata-Barrero 2009). Instead of master narratives of a bounded community, the daily diet is made of utterances depicting a fragmented nation on the brink of secession. The lack of unified sense of “we” seems to disempower otherising and blatant threat narratives. During refugee arrivals in Ceuta, the language was more controlled than in other cases and hybrid seemed more frequent than threat frames. What was most striking, though, was widespread tendency to frame the young and “well-integrated” terrorists – and Muslim migrants in general – as vulnerable, passive victims of manipulating imams. Some news outlets blamed also Catalan pro-independence movements, local public administrators and security forces for being a threat to unity and thus to security, and others accused central government. Reactions were no more unified after the 2004 terror attack in Madrid, this time along political lines (Garcés-Mascreñas 2018). The institutional barrage against the xenophobic Vox party has probably added a further factor to an idea of Us that is not only divided, but also not that exclusionary.

Similarly, xenophobic parties are barred from alliances in Germany. Coalition politics deter clashes over immigration, and this appear in our case studies the less polarised country over the issue, even more clearly than Spain. Correspondingly, media coverage was similar across news outlets along political orientation and market segment and differences were found mainly in editorials and op eds. As we have seen, reportages on the burning of Moria were quite sympathetic to refugees. According to the authors of the national report, this related to a

“moral/political responsibility [...] linked to the highly meaningful issue of German leadership and moral high ground, a role within the EU and beyond that the German public and media have been very actively developing” (Rheindorf and Vollmer 2023). In other words, in Germany the ‘flagging’ of banal nationalism seemed to regard not much its alleged past as bastion of ethno-culturalism (as per Brubaker 1992) but rather its more recent reframing of nationhood in more inclusive terms (on which see Perron 2021). In particular, the positioning of the country as pacesetter of the EU, nurturing a sense of supra-state responsibility appeared to be key, discouraging a nativist or culturalist reaction. In line with this attitude, the media commentary to the attack on the Berlin market did not target religious or ethnic others as in France, although this happened in part of the messages on social media.

Positioning vis a vis other nations was a crucial factor also in Hungary, if with opposite effects. There, as the authors note, in the “polarized and politicized media environment [...] stories can be easily identified by who propagates them (whether pro-government or independent actors). The debate is often reduced to binaries that limit arguments and narratives to ‘are you for or against’ migration/the Hungarian government/Hungarians etc.” Since more than seven years, a “propaganda machinery [...] has created a meta-narrative which is above all the event-related narratives: according to this meta-narrative, Hungary is a great nation under constant threat by external conspiracies supported by the internal opposition” (Bognár et al. 2023). Every counter-narrative is thus neutralized as betrayal of the nation. In a country where the media is largely controlled by the government, the master narrative condensing (not-so-banal) nationalism is not the cumulative outcome of a polyphonic history of debates but the rhetorical move of the dominant voices in an illiberal context.

As we have seen, how opinion leaders imagine the nation is reflected in the way migration is discussed in the media. Master narratives and national myths can go back many decades or a few years and do not develop in the same way. Other important factors in play are the media degree of proximity with specific political parties and political polarization over the issue of migration. The first is extremely high in Hungary but very pronounced also in Italy, while it appeared in its mildest form in Germany (on political parallelism and media systems see Hallin and Mancini 2004). Political polarization on migration seemed strong, apart from these two countries, also in France, while in the UK the two major parties were afraid of alienating an electorate that appears rather divided on the issue of immigration, even if differences between newspapers were still relevant. Where political polarization on migration and media party proximity went together, as in Hungary and Italy, whatever the government in charge, we found a proliferation of radical threat narratives, but also strong civil reactions on social media.

To conclude, the many obstacles in the affirmation of multi-perspectival, nuanced, and awareness-productive narratives on migration have their main roots in politics and the media. The first is too invested in capitalising or not losing the support of public opinion to produce reasonable, accurate, and sensible narratives. The second is not capable of escaping its role of amplifier of political messages and emotive viral narratives. At the beginning and above everything, though, is a legal and symbolic framework, at the European and at the national level, which distinguishes between who belongs and who does not, delivering the material bases for the dehumanisation and otherisation of disposable voices and subjects.

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Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives

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The **BRIDGES Working Papers** are a series of academic publications presenting the research results of the project in a structured and rigorous way. They can either focus on particular case studies covered by the project or adopt a comparative perspective.

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