

THE REFUGEE CRISIS AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM. AN ANALYSIS OF MEDIA FRAMES

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Abstract

Among many conceptualizations, Europeanization can be understood as a mediatized discourse on the triumph and failures of European integration. Supporting this perspective, we turn to framing theory and research to make a comprehensive analysis of the Romanian media coverage of the refugee crisis. We choose to focus on this particular context due to its practical consequences and its potential to refuel Eurosceptic and populist arguments among the member states. Our paper aims to identify the prevalent themes associated with the issue, and the specific manner in which the refugee crisis is framed in high-impact media outlets in Romania. The refugee crisis is the symptom of a broader restructuring of international relations. It is expected that the way this crisis is framed and perceived will shape major political decisions in the EU.

Key words: immigrant crisis, Euroscepticism, European integration, framing

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Introduction

What the media conventionally calls “the European refugee crisis” or “the immigrant crisis” began in 2015, when a rising number of refugees (and among them, economic migrants also) made the journey to the European Union to seek asylum, traveling across the Mediterranean Sea or through Southeast Europe. Due to extreme conditions in Syria and Iraq, 1.5 million migrants left their home countries to make a perilous journey across the Mediterranean. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that more than 1,011,700 migrants arrived by sea in 2015, and almost 34,900 by land¹. War-torn Syria was the migrants’ main country of origin.

While the amplitude of the migratory wave itself suffices to make the headlines, what drew the attention of the international media at first was the human tragedy. In April 2015, a boat with approximately 550 migrants on board sank off the coast of Libya. Officials believe that 400 victims drowned, while other 150 were rescued by the Italian coastguard. During the year 2015, the EU struggled to find humane solutions to cope with the constantly growing number of refugees. The official position of EU leaders was that Europeans must show solidarity, since the latter is core EU value. European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker was very explicit in this regard: “If ever European solidarity needed to manifest itself, it is on the question of the refugee crisis”².

At first, Member States agreed on a ten-point plan to increase financial resources for addressing the problem and expanding the search area for naval missions, as well as to find solutions for many requests for humanitarian aid, asylum and integration. In June 2015, the EU member states agreed to the distribution of refugees, but failed to reach consensus on distribution quotas. In September 2015 the Commission’s proposal for taking in an additional 120,000 refugees met the firm opposition of some member states, including many Eastern-European countries. Recent

¹ BBC, *Migrant crisis: Migration to Europe explained in seven charts*, 2016 [<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911>], 15 August 2016.

² European Commission, *Press release- Refugee Crisis: European Commission takes decisive action*, 2015 [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-5596_en.htm], 15 August 2016.

developments bring progress towards the reform of the Common European Asylum System. The European Commission is committed to ensuring a more humane, fair and efficient European asylum policy. Its first set of proposals were adopted on the 4th May 2016. The Common European Asylum System continues to be the object of refinement and initiative³.

This unique context of crisis sparked our interest whether the recent developments changed the way the EU is perceived (and framed) in the mediatized discourse. Drawing from discourse analysis and framing theory, we consider frames as key instances articulating the on-going discourse on the EU and Europeanization, interpretive packages giving meaning to issues of public interest⁴.

The theoretical framework of our paper revolves around the intricate relationship framing and issue and public perceptions of that issue. In the empirical section, we aim to identify the specific manner in which the issue of the refugee crisis is framed in high-impact media outlets in Romania, knowing that media framing of an issue influences the public perceptions of that issue. Furthermore, we question whether the crisis is represented as an European one (which would mean shifting blame and responsibility on the EU), or as an external disruptive event to be received with hostility.

The refugee crisis is the symptom of a broader restructuring of international relations. During that process, the EU is seeking a new place and destiny as a global actor. Due to the pressure stemming from the domestic accountability of the European leaders, it is expected that the way the refugee crisis is framed and perceived will influence the major political decisions.

Blaming the EU: Euroscepticism or Political Strategy?

As we mentioned in the introductory section, one aim of our study is to find out if the refugee crisis is represented as EU's problem and

³ European Commission, *Completing the reform of the Common European Asylum System*, 2016 [http://ec.europa.eu/news/2016/07/20160713_en.htm], 15 August 2016.

⁴ William Gamson, Andre Modigliani, "Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: A Constructionist Approach" in *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 95(1), 1989

responsibility to solve. If so, EU blaming games might lead to a twist from triumphant Europe to disrupted Europe. There are two general contexts in which the EU becomes the object of blame and criticism: one directly related to EU affairs, the other set in the domestic context. The first context we are referring to is characterized by the existence of an Eurosceptic discourse in the national public spheres, a discourse which takes into consideration the function and outputs of the EU, as well as the results of EU regulations and policies. The second one is not necessarily linked to the direct outcomes of European integration, but to the need to shift blame for unpopular decisions from the political leaders to the more distant supranational institutions.

In one of the most cited definitions in the literature, Euroscepticism is conceptualized as a “contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration”⁵. While “Hard Euroscepticism is a principled opposition to the EU and the European integration”, party-based soft Euroscepticism is characterized by opposition to one or many policy areas in need of improvement⁶. The arguments of Eurosceptics are numerous, but they all gravitate around the following: European institutions are too strong and lack transparency, the European super-state has become distant from its citizens, the EU supports unpopular politics, the sovereignty of the national state is under a threat, European requirements are not fully applicable to developing economies from the Central and Eastern Europe⁷.

Citizens tend to hold the EU responsible in many policies areas, since the decision-making processes have shifted to a significant extent from the national level to the supranational one. Consequently, Euroscepticism manifests itself vigorously in times of crisis, when the costs of European membership seem too great, and/or when EU’s performance

⁵ Paul Taggart, Alex Szcerbiak, “Introduction: Opposing Europe? The Politics of Euroscepticism in Europe, in *Opposing Europe?*” in idem, *The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism*, Volume 1, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 7.

⁶ Paul Taggart, Alex Szcerbiak, *Theorising Party-Based Euroscepticism: Problems of Definition, Measurement and Causality*, Paper prepared for presentation at the 8th Biannual International Conference, Nashville, 2003 p. 2.

⁷ Alina Bârgăoanu, *Examenul Schengen. In căutarea sferei publice europene* [The Schengen Exam. In Search of the European public Sphere], Bucharest: Comunicare.rom, 2011, pp. 42-43.

seems less than average. For instance, during the peak of the economic crisis in Europe, hundreds of thousands of people in Portugal, Greece, and Italy protested about austerity measures, many aiming not at the national governments, but at the European Union⁸.

Nevertheless, the mechanisms of assigning responsibility are more complex than merely shifting responsibility from the national level to supranational institutions. Hobolt and Tilley⁹ emphasize three mechanisms of assigning responsibility: 1. relating to institutions; 2. relating to information; 3. relating to individual biases. For instance, institutional differences, as well as changing economic and political context shape the views of the citizens. Furthermore, when quality information on responsibility in the media exists “it helps creating views similar to expert judgements”¹⁰— meaning a clearer view on how responsibility is distributed between the nation state and the EU.

When assigning responsibility lacks clarity, the EU may become the victim of popular resentment. Research shows that emotions play a great role in Europeanizing voting (eg. referendums) - anger being the worst motivator. Compared to anxious and fearful citizens, the angry ones are less likely to learn about, reflect upon and vote on the basis of the implications of the substantive content of the issue. Furthermore, they are more likely than anxious and fearful citizens to rely on second-order factors, blaming and punishing their government if they are dissatisfied with its performance or relying on habitual partisan-based voting¹¹. Blaming European integration for unsatisfactory national performance is “either plain wrong or, at the very least, that any pressure emanating from integration is redundant in view of exogenous constraints.”¹², but regular

⁸ Sara Hobolt, James Tilley, *Blaming Europe? Responsibility without Accountability in the European Union*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 3.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

¹¹ John Garry, “Emotions and voting in EU referendums” in *European Union Politics*, vol. 15(2), 2014.

¹² Staffan Kumlin, “Blaming Europe? Exploring the variable impact of national public service dissatisfaction on EU trust” in *Journal of European Social Policy*, Vol. 19(5), 2009, p. 418.

citizens are likely unaware of this error and base their attitudes on assumptions about cause and effect.

In a remarkable effort to clarify the many factors involved in assigning responsibility, Hobolt and Tilley¹³ (2014) worked towards a comprehensive model (see Fig. 1). The key factors that make individuals assign responsibility differently are their general attitudes towards the EU, their political awareness and their consumption of information. The authors emphasize that different individual attribution judgements are shaped by the political context (e.g. the information available about the EU and the clarity of multi-level institutions). The model also takes into consideration how divisions of power matter and how the relationship between institution context and attribution of responsibility is mediated by information (at the individual and contextual level). It also indicates the relationship between performance evaluations and responsibility and how that is moderated by group-serving biases.

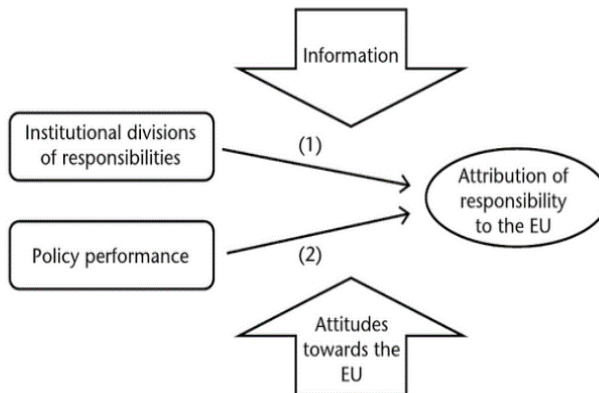


Fig. 1. A Model of assigning responsibility in the EU.

Source: Hobolt & Tilley, 2014, 14.

As the model suggests, attributing responsibility correctly in multilevel systems is very challenging. The same authors acknowledge that “not only may voters have difficulty figuring out who is responsible for

¹³ Sara Hobolt, James Tilley, *Blaming Europe? Responsibility without Accountability in the European Union*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 14.

what, but politicians will have strong incentives to engage in blame shifting and credit taking that will further serve to undermine clear responsibility linkages.”¹⁴. This observation leads us to another context in which the EU can become the scape-goat: blame-shifting strategies in the national context.

Blaming games are an intrinsic part of any political system¹⁵. As it has already been said, blame-avoidance is often claimed to be central to both political and bureaucratic behavior¹⁶. The key aspects of blame avoidance behavior include: (1) the effect of different levels of blame on decisions of officeholders whether to take an active or a passive stance; (2) the temporal sequencing of presentational strategies; (3) the effectiveness of different strategies in affecting the relationship between blame on one day and the next¹⁷.

The blaming theory basic assumptions are: (1). That political actors generally have more to lose in electoral terms from perceived failure than can be won from perceived success (the negative bias assumption). As a consequence, actors will put more time and effort in shifting blame, than in taking credit. The negative bias means that blame avoidance strategies shape the nature of institutional reforms and political agendas, and include direct attempts to persuade the public that other actors, perhaps at other levels, are responsible for failure¹⁸. (2). Scapegoating depends on citizens forming meaningful perceptions of how credit and blame are distributed across actors and levels, and is the most effective where such perceptions “not only exist in an isolated sense but are part of a coherent belief system.”- the “constrained perceptions assumption”¹⁹.

¹⁴ Sara Hobolt, James Tilley, “Who’s in Charge? How Voters Attribute Responsibility in the European Union” in *Comparative Political Studies*, XX(X), 2013, p. 5.

¹⁵ Sten Hansson, “Discursive strategies of blame avoidance in government: A framework for analysis” in *Discourse & Society*, vol. 26(3), 2015, p. 298.

¹⁶ Christopher Hood, “What happens when transparency meets blame avoidance?” in *Public Management Review*, vol. 9, 2007, no. 2.

¹⁷ Christopher Hood, Will Jennings, Paul Copeland, “Blame Avoidance in Comparative Perspective: Reactivity, Staged Retreat and Efficacy” in *Public Administration*, vol. 94, no. 2, 2016, p. 544.

¹⁸ Staffan Kumlin, “Claiming blame and giving credit? Unintended effects of how government and opposition frame the Europeanization of welfare” in *European Union Politics*, vol. 12(4), 2011, p 579

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

Blame avoidance is a very frequent strategy in periods of austerity²⁰ or during different crises - e.g. the aftermath of the oil shock in the 1970's²¹. Such strategies are also of the greatest importance for the implementation of radical reforms, when they are politically needed because welfare state reform is typically and generally an unpopular endeavor, likely to cost the governing party or parties votes.²²

Blame avoidance strategies have been extensively documented in the literature. The linguistic approach²³ (classifies such strategies under six categories. The first one focuses on ways of arguing- either the perception of loss by proposing that there is little or no reason to blame anyone because little or no harm has been done, or by the perception of agency by proposing that harm has been done unintentionally, unknowingly, involuntarily or by someone else. Argumentative fallacies that neglect certain premises of rational discussion are also included here. Other strategies include: wof framing (e.g. Rescue narrative, the Bad Apple frame), ways of denying, and ways of representing actors and actions. Representations of social actors may be analyzed in terms of how calculated ways of naming are used for membership categorization and how calculated ways of attributing are used for portraying actors either as more positive or negative. Blame is easier shifted to "other" or to "the bad guys". Lastly, blame avoidance takes place through specific ways of legitimizing and/or manipulating.

In political science there are at least three broad kinds of blame-avoidance strategies that can be identified from the literature: agency strategies, presentational strategies and policy strategies²⁴. Agency strategies are attempts to avoid or limit blame by arguing that formal responsibility, competency or jurisdiction is allocated among other institutions and officeholders²⁵. In

²⁰ Nathalie Giger, Moira Nelson, "The electoral consequences of welfare state retrenchment: Blame avoidance or credit claiming in the era of permanent austerity?" in *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 50, 2010.

²¹ Reimut Zohlnhöfer, "The Politics of Budget Consolidation in Britain and Germany: The Impact of Blame Avoidance Opportunities" in *West European Politics*, vol. 30, no. 5, 2007.

²² Barbara Vis, Kees van Kersbergen, "Towards an Open Functional Approach to Welfare State Change: Pressures, Ideas, and Blame Avoidance" in *Public Administration*, vol. 91, no. 4, 2013, p. 841.

²³ Sten Hansson, "Discursive strategies of blame avoidance in government: A framework for analysis" in *Discourse & Society*, vol. 26(3), 2015

²⁴ Christopher Hood, "What happens when transparency meets blame avoidance?" in *Public Management Review*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2007.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 199.

other words, the approach is to shift the blame for unpopular decisions to another institutional setting²⁶. Presentational strategies spin, time, stage and manage the argument, by offering plausible excuses, turning blame into credit by justificatory arguments that accentuate the positive or by diverting public attention onto other matters²⁷. Policy strategies are attempts by officeholders or institutions to avoid or limit blame by the substance or content of what they do rather than in how the issue is presented²⁸.

At the national level, blame avoidance and credit claiming between the government and opposition makes it clear that what is good news for one side is bad for the other, whereas this type of zero-sum thinking is less obvious when political levels are involved²⁹. And this is precisely EU's case: "Certainly, the real-world relationship between the EU and a member state cannot be boiled down to a simple zero-sum game. Not least, work on 'multilevel governance' emphasizes how intertwined, interdependent and ambiguous decision-making at different political levels is"³⁰. The nation state is affected by Europeanization in less than obvious ways. The relation between national and European regulations is frequently disputed and indirect, and therefore "provides fertile soil for attempts to reshape citizens' views of how credit and blame is distributed"³¹. It is a facile escape route for pressured governments to use the EU as a scapegoat in order to survive the unpopularity of austerity measures. Hobolt and Tilley concluded that policy-makers use three types of blaming strategies with regard to the EU: scapegoating, redefining the issue, and circling the wagon³².

²⁶ Carsten Daugbjerg, Alan Swinbank, "The Politics of CAP Reform: Trade Negotiations, Institutional Settings and Blame Avoidance" in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 45, number 1, 2007.

²⁷ Christopher Hood, "What happens when transparency meets blame avoidance?" in *Public Management Review*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2007, p. 200

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ Staffan Kumlin, "Claiming blame and giving credit? Unintended effects of how government and opposition frame the Europeanization of welfare" in *European Union Politics*, vol. 12(4), 2011, p. 579.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 589.

³² Sara Hobolt, James Tilley, *Blaming Europe? Responsibility without Accountability in the European Union*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

In the end of this section we must emphasize that blame games have significant societal implications, as they “derail, obstruct or prevent public debates over certain policy issues, alter political agendas and alliances, legitimate some actors and disempower/delegitimize others³³. Due to the consequences of blame avoidance strategies for delegitimizing the EU, we will focus in the empirical section the presence/ absence of the “blaming EU” frame in the mediated discourse with respect to refugee crisis.

Frames: shaping the way we perceive an issue

As previously mentioned, this paper aims at identifying the key frames and narratives employed by the Romanian mainstream media discourse when tackling the refugee crisis. Given that media messages are a rich source of frames regarding the world they present³⁴ and considering that news frames play a leading role in shaping perceptions of everyday realities³⁵, we should look deeper into the mediatized discourse in order to understand how the current debate over the recent migratory waves is processed and perceived. However, one must always keep in mind that, although the media should ideally provide a balanced account of all the events as they occur, media news actually present to the public a particular framing of reality and thus a biased account, by including specific aspects and interpretations while leaving others out³⁶.

In dedicated literature, a common view regarding frames defines them as patterns of interpretation generated by emphasizing certain aspects

³³ Sten Hansson, “Discursive strategies of blame avoidance in government: A framework for analysis” in *Discourse & Society*, vol. 26(3), 2015, p. 298.

³⁴ Shanto Iyengar, Mark D Peters, Donald R. Kinder, “Experimental demonstrations of the “not-so-minimal” consequences of television news programs” in *American Political Science Review*, no. 4, vol. 76, 1982.

³⁵ Claes H. De Vreese, “New avenues for framing research” in *American Behavioral Scientist*, no. 3, vol. 56, 2012.

³⁶ Stephanie A. Fryberg, Nicole M. Stephens, Rebecca Covarrubias, Hazel Rose Markus, Erin D Carter, Giselle A. Laiduc, Ana J. Salido, “How the media frames the immigration debate: The critical role of location and politics” in *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, no. 1, vol. 12, 2012.

of reality and hiding or minimizing others³⁷. Framing effects refer to the way information is selected, organized, packaged and presented in the public discourse so as to make accessible and encourage a specific interpretation of a given issue³⁸. Thus, frames “define problems”, “diagnose causes”, “make moral judgments”, “suggest remedies”³⁹ and “direct attention to particular reference points or considerations”⁴⁰. In a nutshell, frames can be seen as a guide for understanding and interpreting new mediated information and for “arranging” it with already existing knowledge⁴¹. Hence, frames seem to play an equally important role in news production and news reception and may cause changes in thoughts, viewpoints, expectations and behaviour. Put differently, the exposure to a particular frame may impact upon both the attitudes that people form as well as how people respond to and behave toward specific policy areas⁴². Nevertheless, as Shuck and de Vreese showed, attitudes and knowledge preceding the exposure to the news message play an important role on determining the framing effects, the latter being also influenced by the receiver’s propensity to look at a debated issue from a certain perspective⁴³. However, some academics show that framing effects are not limited to changing certain opinions; they also imply adding new beliefs⁴⁴.

³⁷ Robert M. Entman, “Contesting the White House’s Frame After 9/11” in *Political Communication*, no. 4, vol. 20, 2003.

³⁸ Robert M. Entman, “Framing bias: Media in the distribution of power” in *Journal of communication*, no. 1, vol. 57, 2007.

³⁹ Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm” in *Journal of Communication*, no. 4, vol. 43, 1993.

⁴⁰ Shanto Iyengar, “Framing responsibility for political issues: The case of poverty” in *Political behavior*, no. 1, vol. 12, 1990, p. 20

⁴¹ Bertram Scheufele, “Framing-effects approach: A theoretical and methodological critique” in *Communications*, no. 4, vol. 29, 2004.

⁴² Michael A Cacciatore, Dietram A. Scheufele, Shanto Iyengar, “The end of framing as we know it... and the future of media effects” in *Mass Communication and Society*, no. 1, vol. 19, 2016.

⁴³ Andreas R. T. Shuck, Claes H. De Vreese, “Between Risk and Opportunity. News Framing and its Effects on Public Support for EU Enlargement” in *European Journal of Communication*, no.1, vol. 21, 2006.

⁴⁴ Sophie Lecheler, Claes H. de Vreese, Rune Slothuus, “Issue importance as a moderator of framing effects” in *Communication research*, no. 3, vol. 36, 2009.

The prominence of news frames in building a certain representation of facts generated in academic debates a high degree of interest concerning a typology of frames⁴⁵. Besides Iyengar's classification highlighting episodic versus thematic news frames⁴⁶, de Vreese distinguishes between issue-specific (apply only to news or to specific topics) and generic news frames⁴⁷, which can be associated with various topics, and further classified into five categories: "human impact", "powerlessness", "economics", "morality" and "conflict"⁴⁸. Other studies have revealed the existence of pre-defined news frames and frames emerging in the course of analysis⁴⁹. Similarly, Scheufele differentiates between communicator-based and effects-based frames. While the first describe how the content is presented due to journalistic choices and work routines, the latter describe what is presented, focusing on the aspects that determine a certain orientation of the reader⁵⁰. Finally, according to Kinder and Sanders there is a firm distinction between media frames – defined as "devices embedded in the political discourse" and individual frames, understood as "internal structures of the mind"⁵¹.

With regard to migration discourses in press and TV news, studies reflect a rather negative representation of immigrants in mass media⁵². Although the political orientation of the specific newspaper/ TV channel tends to influence the coverage and framing of the migration topic, the overall tendency in news reporting remains rather sceptical towards both

⁴⁵ Donald R. Kinder, Lynn M. Sanders, *Divided by color: Racial politics and democratic ideals*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

⁴⁶ Shanto Iyengar, "Framing responsibility for political issues: The case of poverty" in *Political behavior*, no. 1, vol. 12, 1990.

⁴⁷ Claes H. De Vreese, "Television reporting of second-order elections" in *Journalism Studies*, no. 2, vol. 4, 2003.

⁴⁸ W. Russell Neuman, Marion R Just, Ann N.Crigler, *Common knowledge*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

⁴⁹ Claes H. De Vreese, "News framing: Theory and typology" in *Information Design Journal + Document Design*, no. 1, vol. 13, 2005.

⁵⁰ Bertram Scheufele, "Framing-effects approach: A theoretical and methodological critique" in *Communications*, no. 4, vol. 29, 2004.

⁵¹ Donald R. Kinder, Lynn M. Sanders, "Mimicking political debate with survey questions: The case of white opinion on affirmative action for blacks" in *Social cognition*, no. 1, vol. 8, 1990, p. 74.

⁵² Baldwin Van Gorp, "Where is the frame? Victims and intruders in the Belgian press coverage of the asylum issue" in *European Journal of Communication*, no. 4, vol. 20, 2005.

the asylum-seekers fleeing conflict and the working migrants in search of a better future. Also, in light of the current situation in Europe, migrants' portrayal in the media grew highly negative, with news frames relating them to danger, insecurity, and (ethnic) threat⁵³). More recently, both refugees and migrants (Muslims mostly) became commonly associated with religious fanaticism and terrorism, Islam being presented as a threat to Western values, and Muslims being depicted as "intruders", "cowards", "fanatical", "violent" and "terrorists"⁵⁴.

Methodology

Our paper addresses the restructuring of the international system brought by the refugee crisis from the perspective of media studies. Following a communicational approach, we are interested in how the refugee crisis was covered by the media in Romania, how the issue was framed and who was deemed responsible. Furthermore, we inquire whether the situation was represented as a humanitarian crisis or a security issue for the EU.

We explore these topics by means of a quantitative method of research, more precisely content analysis. The recording and context unit are identical - the online news article. Given the growing tendency towards the digitalization of journalism, we selected two online news websites (hotnews.ro and ziare.com), and two press agencies' websites (mediafax.ro and agerpres.ro). The period of analysis starts from 1st of September 2015 to 30th of September 2015, this being the most eventful month, according to the timeline of the crisis for the year 2015. It is expected that the media coverage of the topic will reflect the busy series of events during the first month of Fall.

We conducted a two-step selection of the corpus. Firstly, we used the search function provided by each of the four websites to identify articles related to the subject. By using a broad range of key words (migrant, migrants,

⁵³ Katerina Manevska, Peter Achterberg, "Immigration and perceived ethnic threat: Cultural capital and economic explanations" in *European Sociological Review*, no. 3, vol. 29, 2011.

⁵⁴ Magdalena Wojcieszak, Rachid Azrout, Hajo Boomgaarden, Amanda Paz Alencar, Penelope Sheets, "Integrating Muslim immigrant minorities: the effects of narrative and statistical messages" in *Communication Research*, no. 4, vol. 44, 2017.

refugee, refugees, immigrant, immigrants, emigrant, emigrants, asylum seeker, asylum seekers, quota, quotas, and mandatory quotas), a total number of 6,334 news were identified. Considering a probability of 95% and an error margin of $\pm 3\%$, a sample of 763 articles was extracted. During the coding process, 34 news articles were eliminated, based on lack of connection to the topic of the refugee crisis. The final corpus consisted of 729 news.

The research questions that guide our analysis focus on the identification of prominent themes and frames:

RQ1. What are the prevalent themes associated with the refugee crisis, as reflected by the media coverage of the topic, for the period of analysis?

RQ2. What are the prevalent frames of the refugee crisis, as reflected by the media coverage of the topic, for the period of analysis?

RQ3. Is the refugee crisis perceived as EU's responsibly, or as an external occurrence?

The answers to these questions will contribute to a better understanding of the public perception of this complex issue. We aspect identify the prevalent media themes and frames, and to explore whether the EU is blamed for causing or aggravating the crisis.

Findings and Discussion

Out of the total number of news articles of 6,337, only 2,679 focus on the refugee crisis, meaning roughly 42%. The news on the refugee crisis were distributed across news portals, thematic areas and subthemes. We were able to identify 14 thematic areas, as follows: recent events, business, press releases, culture, economy, English (meaning a section dedicated to articles in English), foreign affairs, justice, lifestyle, politics, social, sports, news of the day.

It is worth mentioning that this is an exhaustive list covering all the four portals, but not all thematic areas could be found on each portal. Table 1 depicts the unequal distribution of the thematic areas across websites. Data shows that the refugee crisis was covered mainly under one of the following thematic areas: foreign affairs (41.7%), recent events (31.28%), politics (12.35%),

social (4.94%), and press releases (3.7%). Surprisingly, the refugee crisis is not analysed in relation to its implications on the economy (0.69%)- see Fig.1.

Table 1. News distribution on thematic areas, across news portals

	hotnews.ro	ziare.com	mediafax.ro	agerpres.ro
news	110	118	0	0
business	0	5	0	0
press releases	0	0	0	27
culture	0	0	3	2
economy	1	0	3	1
english	0	0	0	5
international affairs	0	0	127	177
justice	0	0	1	1
lifestyle	0	2	2	1
politics	0	23	35	32
press review	7	0	0	5
social	0	0	28	8
sports	1	0	1	2
news of the day	0	0	0	1

As shown in Table 1, the news agencies (agerpres.ro și mediafax.ro) are the ones that filed the refugee crisis under the thematic area of external affairs, whereas the news websites (hotnews.ro and ziare.com) chose to relate to the topic more as a novelty (thematic area “news”). Irrespective of the editorial choice, the implications are similar: all four media outlets distance themselves from the crisis, which is represented, alternatively, as a question of foreign affairs, or as one among the many events of the day.

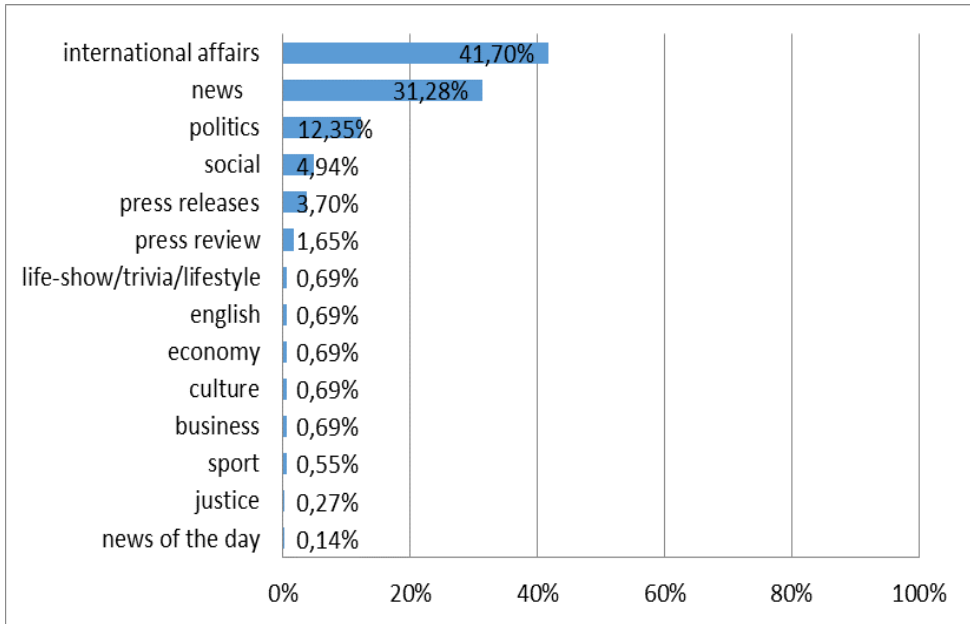


Fig. 2. News distribution per thematic area

The widest distribution of the news across thematic areas can be found on the agerpres.ro website, whereas the narrowest, on hotnews.ro and ziare.com (Fig. 3). More specifically, the news on agerpress.ro are spread across 12 thematic areas, the only ones missing being “recent news” and “business”. In turn, Mediafax news covers unevenly 8 thematic areas. The uncovered thematic areas in this case are recent news, business, press releases, English section, press review, and news of the day. Hotnews.ro and ziare.com both cover 5 thematic areas that overlap only in the case of “recent events”. It can be argued that press agencies tend to cover the refugee from multiple perspectives more than news portals do.

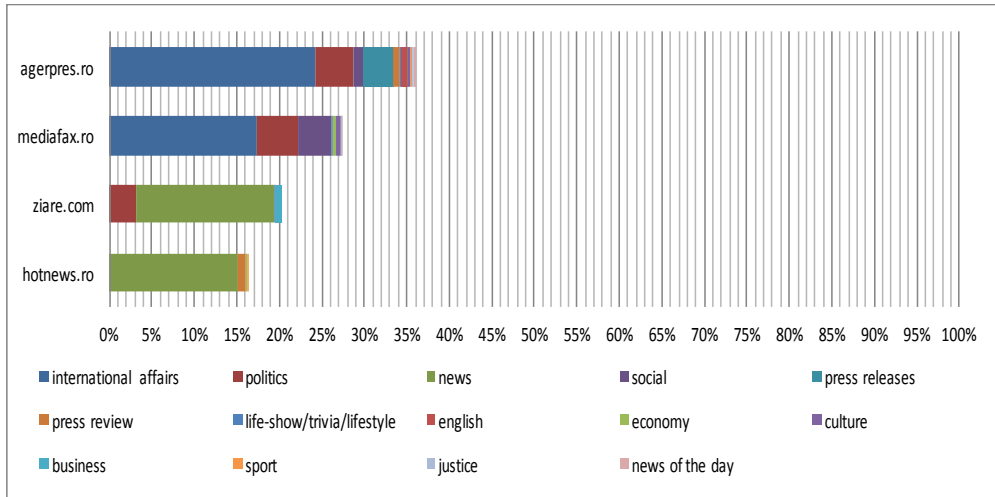


Fig. 3. Thematic area distribution per website

During the coding process, a total number of 34 sub-themes were identified. In order to facilitate analysis, these sub-themes were in turn reorganized in 6 main sub-themes (Domestic and international actors, Europe/ The EU, Migrant invasion, International, Issue-specific subthemes, General subthemes), as shown in Table 2.

Under the subtheme “Domestic and international actors” we included all topics related to different types of public actors. Notably, the only prominent international actor is Angela Merkel, who played a leading role during the unfolding of events, due to highly controversial statements welcoming refugees in Germany. All the other actors are domestic political figures: Klaus Iohannis – President of Romania, Victor Ponta – (then) Prime-Minister, Bogdan Aurescu – (then) Minister of Foreign Affairs, Cristian Preda – Member of the EP, Monica Macovei – Member of the EP, Vasile Blaga – President of PNL (political party), Traian Băsescu – President of PMP (political party) and former Head of State. This distribution – contradicting the basic reality of the refugees crisis as being EU-wide problem - suggests that online media outlets in Romania are focused on the local perspective, instead of acknowledging or responding to the public debate in other national public spheres.

Table 2. Subthemes reorganized in 6 main categories

Domestic and international actors	Europe/ The EU	Migrant invasion	International	Specific issues	General issues
Angela Merkel	EU funds	Migrant invasion	International	Business	Fundamental
Bogdan Aurescu	Europe-Germany	Migrant invasion-Europe	International-Islamic State	Football	Media
Cristian Preda	Europe-European countries	Migrant invasion-France	International-Turkey	Politics	Opinions
Klaus Iohannis	Europe-Hungary	Migrant invasion-Germany		Stars	Radio TV
Monica Macovei		Migrant invasion - Greece			Issue of the day
Traian Basescu		Migrant invasion - Italy			
Vasile Blaga		Migrant invasion - Romania			
Victor Ponta		Migrant invasion - Syria			
		Migrant invasion - Turkey			
		Migrant invasion - Hungary			

The subtheme “Europe/The EU” comprises all topics referring to Europe as a geographic or political space: EU funds, Europe-Germany, Europe-European countries, Europe-Hungary.

The following subtheme, “immigrant invasion” includes topics such as: Migrant invasion, Migrant invasion-Europe, Migrant invasion-France, Migrant invasion-Germany, Migrant invasion – Greece, Migrant invasion – Italy, Migrant invasion – Romania, Migrant invasion – Syria, Migrant invasion – Turkey, Migrant invasion – Hungary. In this particular case, we would like to draw attention from the start to the fact that the name itself (invasion) has negative connotations, thus influencing the public perception of the issue.

The “International” subtheme grouped the topics International, International-Islamic State, International-Turkey.

Under the “Specific issues” subtheme we filed topics reflecting particular interests, such as Business, Football, Politics and Stars (e.g. from showbusiness).

The “General issues” include the more broad (unspecific) topics: Fundamental issues, Media, Opinions, Radio, TV, Issue of the day.

As depicted in Table 3, in the case of hotnews.ro and ziare.com all the main thematic areas are organized in subthemes, whereas in the case of the news agencies, subthemes can be identified in only a few notable exceptions.

Table 3. Distribution of restructured subthemes according to news portals

	Restructured subthemes							Total
	No sub theme	Domestic and international actors	Europe/ The EU	Migrant invasion	International	Specific issues	General issues	
portal hotnews.ro	1	0	1	0	76	8	33	119
ziare.com	0	13	3	123	5	4	0	148
mediafax.ro	198	0	0	0	0	0	2	200
agerpres.ro	260	0	0	0	0	0	2	262
Total	459	13	4	123	81	12	37	729

More than half of the total number of news (63%) are not included in a subtheme at all (Fig. 4). Out of the remaining 37%, most articles cover the refugee crisis as an invasion (16.87), others file it under the category of international

events (11.11%), or under general issues (5.08%). This distribution suggests that the refugee crisis is not depicted in the media as Europe's problem. Instead, it is perceived as an external, violent interruption of the status quo. The crisis is almost dissociated from Europe/ The EU, this subtheme being identified in less than 1% of the cases.

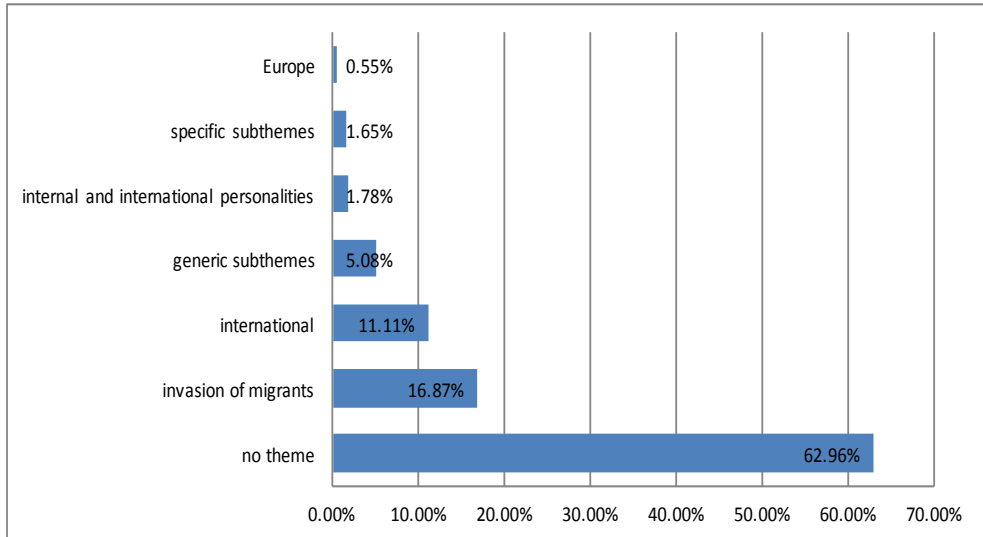


Fig. 4. Distribution of news per recoded subthemes

Framing the refugee crisis

Our second research question focuses on how the refugee crisis is framed in the news. Throughout the analysis, we will refer to the following general news frames: responsibility frame, conflict frame, human interest frame, economic consequences frame. Data suggests that the responsibility frame is the most visible (mean $\bar{x}=0,67$, standard deviation $s=0,320$), followed by conflict (mean $\bar{x}=0,38$, standard deviation $s=0,358$). Less frequent are the human interest frame ($\bar{x}=0,19$, standard deviation $s=0,332$), and economic consequences (means $\bar{x}=0,11$, standard deviation $s=0,244$).

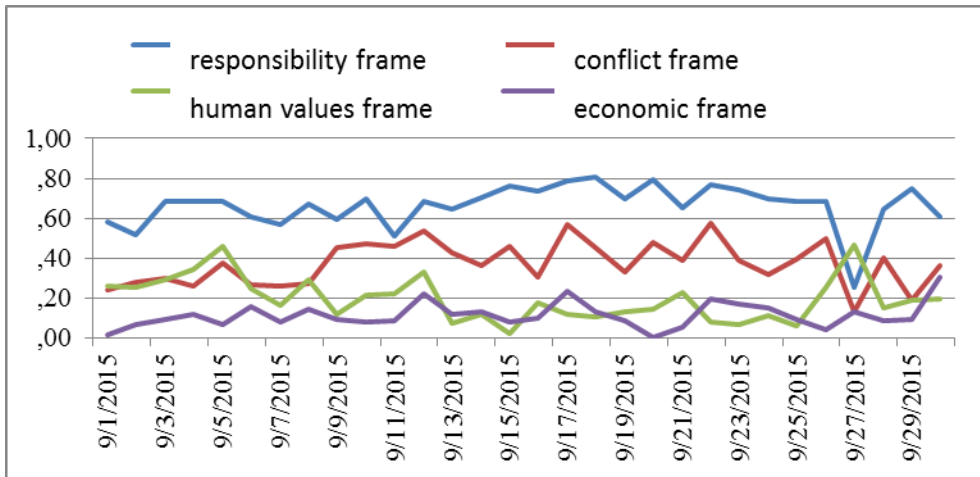


Fig. 5. Prominence of frames (total, in time)

When analysing the evolution of frames in time (Fig. 5), it becomes apparent that the responsibility frame is the most prominent, closely followed by the conflict frame, and that this hierarchy remains unaltered with only a few exceptions. This is in line with the “blaming games” theory, as presented in our literature review section. Media is often inclined to frame sensitive topics in terms of “finding the guilty ones” or “scapegoating”, even in the case of events with profound humanistic implications, such as the drama of the refugees flying conflict by taking enormous risks.

The 3rd and 4th place are disputed alternatively by the human interest and the economic consequences frames. The exceptions relate to the first week of September, when human interest frame becomes, for a little while, the most prominent one, and the last week of analysis, when this frame gains momentum for the second time. These peeks are associated with news related to human losses and growing number of victims among the refugees.

At this point, we can conclude that there is evidence in favour of the argument that the EU is not victim of a blaming game. We have shown that topics related to the refugee crisis were include in the foreign affairs or recent events category, that international actors are almost absent, and that subthemes connecting the crisis to Europe or the EU could be found in less than 1% of the cases. Nevertheless, the prominence of the responsibility frame suggests that media coverage is deeply preoccupied with identifying those culpable or responsible for drafting a solution. It appears that the EU

is not held accountable, though. The prevalence of the conflict frame second to the responsibility frame, as well as the prevalence of the migrant invasion subtheme encourage us to conclude that economic of humanitarian arguments lose ground in favour of the perception of the crisis as a security threat.

Conclusions

To conclude, two important and connected phenomena related to the refugees' crisis could be identified in the Romanian online media. Firstly, this new European crisis – with multiple security implications – has been largely thematised as an invasion. The term “*invasion of migrants*” has often been used to depict the many facets of the refugees' crisis, this contributing to the oversimplification of the whole discussion. Coherent and neutral analyses on the social and economic implications simply lacked or, if present, were rather superficial. This implies that the migration debate revolved around an exaggerated emphasis placed on threats to the national security, which has also shaped public opinion on this rather sensitive topic.

Secondly, the migration crisis has been extensively framed in accountability terms. The prevailing responsibility frame directed the discussion towards the necessity to find the ones – be them institutional or individual stakeholders – in charge of the whole situation. In line with similar research, this blaming game is confusing and diverts the public's attention from real issues and solutions.

In a nutshell, our research reveals that the Romanian online media has intensively oversimplified the debate on the migration crisis, by overemphasizing the security risks, on the one hand, and underemphasizing the need for feasible solutions to tackle the crisis, on the other one.

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