

More (about) Borders, less (about) Humans: Media Coverage of Migration and Asylum Seeking in Greece

Heinrich Böll Foundation
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki*

* Naya Kalfeli (Adjunct Lecturer - Postdoctoral Research Fellow), Christina Angeli (Research Fellow), Ioanna Kostopoulou (Research Assistant), Christos Frangonikolopoulos (Professor of International Relations and Mass Communications) and Antonis Gardikiotis (Associate Professor of Social Psychology and the Mass Media) — School of Journalism and Mass Communications, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.

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SUMMARY OF RESULTS

This study examines the coverage of migration and asylum seeking in eight Greek media outlets (Efsyn, Ta Nea, I Kathimerini, Proto Thema, Eleftheros Typos, Makeleio, iefimerida and zougla) between September and November 2021 using a quantitative content analysis.

The main findings are:

Media coverage was strongly shaped by the discourse of (Greek and European) political elites and the decisions taken by them. In contrast, it was much less influenced by non-elite sources and, in particular, the voice of refugees and migrants themselves. At the same time, reporting was more concerned about border security and restrictive measures of surveillance and control than about human security and solutions based on human rights.

Four in ten news stories portrayed refugees and migrants as a threat to security, painting them as invaders and enemies at the gates of Greece and Europe. Similarly, around three-quarters of news stories dehumanized refugees and migrants, by representing them as subjects without human traits or as resources (to be exploited).

When refugees and migrants were the subject of media coverage, men were often disproportionately represented. This was particularly true in visual framing.

At the same time, nine out of ten pictures that included refugees and migrants, portrayed them in 'states of exception' (boat people, behind wire fences, in camps and at the borders). Seven out of ten portrayed them as a mass of people without specific characteristics, while only about one out of ten pictures focused on the individual.

The media predominantly used the term "migrants", a word which implies people not at high risk. At the same time, the term "refugees", referring to people in need of protection, was used in almost half of the news stories.

Differences emerged between the media studied, which can essentially be attributed to their political orientation and editorial lines. In particular, the portrayal of refugees and migrants in the reporting of the left-wing Efsyn was significantly less negative overall than in the rest of the media outlets, especially the far-right tabloid Makeleio, representing a 'hate reporting' approach.

At the same time, though, the present study disclosed important similarities in news coverage between media outlets, revealing a set of patterns in media coverage, which often lead to a poor and simplistic approach to the representation of migration and asylum seeking in the Greek media.

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CONTEXT AND CONTEMPORARY INFORMATION

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan after taking control of the capital Kabul, bringing to an end nearly 20 years of the US-led coalition's presence in the country. The Taliban's violent takeover of Afghanistan [caused tens of thousands of Afghans to flee](#), often by taking desperate measures. For most people unfamiliar with geopolitics, the situation in Afghanistan came to light only recently, with the dramatic fall of Kabul and the surrender of the country to the Taliban in August 2021. However, the prevailing narrative about the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan ignores the decades of violence and turmoil Afghans have suffered.

As the crisis in Afghanistan unfolded, rising numbers of people in urgent need of protection brought migration to the forefront of international political debate and amplified a growing fear among global leaders regarding increased migration flows. European leaders, haunted by the 2015 refugee crisis resulting from the Syrian war, clearly expressed their will to avoid another large-scale influx of refugees and migrants from Afghanistan. As a result, voices and policies that prioritize tough borders instead of protection towards refugees and migrants have become more popular within the European Union. In its statement on 31 August 2021 concerning the situation in Afghanistan, the Council clearly outlined the EU's priorities: "[Based on lessons learned, the EU and its Member States stand determined to act jointly to prevent the recurrence of uncontrolled large-scale illegal migration movements faced in the past](#)". Currently, several EU countries have highlighted the need to effectively protect the EU external borders — instead of humans — and prevent unauthorized entries. That being said, policies of closed borders are often adorned with a humanitarian cloak as the fight against human smuggling.

Overall, migration and asylum-seeking issues are hanging over Europe: on the Greek–Turkish border, between Spain and Morocco, on the Polish–Belarusian border and in the English Channel. In March 2020, Turkey's decision not to prevent refugees and migrants from leaving the country, along with widespread misinformation that the border

to Greece was open, led to scenes resembling the peak of the refugee crisis in 2015, as thousands of refugees and migrants moved towards the Evros borderline hoping to cross into the European Union. In May 2021, thousands of Moroccan and sub-Saharan refugees and migrants attempted to cross into the Spanish-controlled enclave of Ceuta, located at the northern tip of Morocco. Rising numbers of refugees and migrants risking their lives to cross the English Channel in migrant boats resulted in another volatile emergency within the EU. As this study was being conducted, yet another humanitarian crisis unfolded on Europe's frontiers, in November 2021, as thousands of refugees and migrants became trapped at the border between Poland and Belarus, strongly resembling the crisis at the Greek–Turkish border in March 2020. Poland received support from the EU to “toughen” its borders and spoke of a ‘hybrid attack’ ([as Greece did in the past](#)) and of an ‘instrumentalization’ of refugees and migrants that Belarus was using as ‘weapons’ (similar to what Turkey did in the past, [according to Greek officials](#)). As successive humanitarian crises unfold at the external borders of the European Union, new challenges are presented, and important decisions are required on behalf of both the Union and its Member States.

CURRENT SITUATION IN GREECE

Greece has been no exception to the issues above. In fact, since 2020, the country has been hardening its approach with walled camps and stronger border controls. In March 2020, as a response to the crisis on the Greek–Turkish border, Greece closed its borders, suspended the asylum procedure and deployed Greek security forces to prevent people from entering the country. A year later, in July 2021, [Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis reaffirmed Greece's commitment to protect its borders, which are also the borders of the European Union](#). Similar to what happens in other European Union countries, though, this approach is often dressed in a humanitarian cloak, in which policies of tough borders are often represented as a battle against smugglers. As Notis Mitarakis claims, [“We are not against migrants, and especially refugees, but we are clearly against the smugglers' circuits and their actions”](#).

According to the [UNHCR Operational Data Portal](#) (2021), a total of 9,157 refugees and migrants arrived in Greece by the end of December 2021. Out of those, 4,826 people arrived by land, mostly from the Greek-Turkish borderline of Evros, and 4,331 people arrived in Greece by sea, mostly from the island of Lesbos. As of November 2021, the total number of residents in reception centres and other hosting facilities in the whole country was 37,951, according to the [Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum](#). In 2021 (as of October 31), the majority of sea arrivals to Greece originated from Afghanistan (26%), Somalia (15.9%) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (9%). Around half of the arrivals were children (29%) and women (19.3%), while 51.6% were men. In November 2021, though, Greek migration minister Notis Mitarakis claimed that [“we are now dealing with economic migrants, two-thirds of whom come from safe countries, while the remaining one-third want to come to the EU through](#)

[safe countries](#)".² That being said, in 2021, the [Global Economy Security Threat index](#) ranked Afghanistan as first, Somalia as seventh and the Democratic Republic of Congo as thirteenth among 173 countries worldwide with the highest security threat, resulting from bombings, attacks and battle-related deaths, rebel movements, mutinies, coups, or terrorism.

The UNHCR Operational Data Portal also shows that compared to the previous years, 2021 was the year with the fewest sea and land arrivals. In 2020, a total of 15,696 refugees and migrants arrived in Greece, while in 2019, 74,613. [According to Notis Mitarakis, new arrivals in 2021 were 90% lower than in 2019.](#) Several humanitarian organizations, however, such as [Amnesty International](#), have claimed that the actual number of people seeking to enter Greece in 2021 may have been different, given the systematic cases of pushbacks at both the Greek-Turkish border and at the Aegean Islands, which have been recorded, although Greece's conservative government has repeatedly denied these allegations. Moreover, in June 2021, the European Parliament issued [a report](#) saying Frontex ignored evidence of probable migrant pushbacks, and evidence of potential human rights violations was not addressed or investigated. In September 2021, the Greek Parliament, despite significant criticism from NGOs and [requests from the Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner](#), approved a law establishing strict restrictions for organizations operating in the areas of competence relating to the Greek Coast Guard.

Within the same month, Greece opened its first refugee holding camp on Samos Island. This is one of five new facilities being built with EU financing, while in late November, similar camps opened on the Greek islands of Leros and Kos. The two largest camps on Lesbos and Chios are to come into operation this year as the government tightens its migration policy.

MIGRATION TO GREECE AND PAST MEDIA REPORTING

Migration to Greece has been part of a wider global phenomenon of population displacement as a result of a variety of geopolitical, social and economic changes taking place in Europe and worldwide. In the early 1990s, Greece changed from a migrant-sending to a migrant-receiving country. Migrants came mostly from the former socialist countries (mainly from Albania) as economic migrants, and settled permanently in Greece, with no intention of moving to another EU country. This situation persisted until the mid to late 2000s, when social and economic globalization processes, together with advances in transportation, communications and

2. In June 2021, a Joint Ministerial Decision recognized Turkey as a "safe third country" in a national list for asylum seekers coming from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Somalia. As a result, such nationalities' petitions may be rejected as "inadmissible" without being considered on their merits.

technology, facilitated the development of mixed migration flows of irregular migrants and asylum seekers from Asia and Africa along the Greek–Turkish border. Under these new circumstances, since the mid to late 2000s, Greece has no longer been just a country of reception for refugees and migrants, but also a place of transit for the movement of migrants, most of whom do not intend to settle in the country but to move to one of the ‘attractive’ countries of Northern and Central Europe.

Lying at the crossroads of three continents (Europe, Asia and Africa), Greece has become, since the early 2000s, the main gateway into the European Union for undocumented migrants and asylum seekers from Asia and Africa. At the same time, Greece’s poor longstanding migration policies and serious weaknesses in processing asylum seekers’ requests, as well as the European Dublin system under the ‘first country of arrival’ rule and an unprecedented financial, political and social crisis that hit Greece in 2009, have led to rising social and political tensions around migration in major urban centres, especially in central Athens (Kalfeli, 2020).

And then, in 2011, the war in Syria erupted, and millions of people had to flee their country, undertaking dangerous routes, such as boarding overcrowded boats in order to reach European territory. [In 2015, more than 800,000 people crossed the Aegean Sea from Turkey to the Greek islands](#) to reach safety, accounting for 80% per cent of the people arriving irregularly in Europe by sea that year, during one of the worst humanitarian challenges in recent history. This unprecedented arrival of thousands of people on the Greek islands overwhelmed the country, which was still in the midst of its financial crisis.

Five years later, in 2020, Turkey’s decision not to prevent refugees and migrants from crossing through its territory, together with widespread misinformation that the border to Greece was open, led to scenes resembling the peak of the refugee crisis in 2015. Thousands of refugees and migrants moved towards the Evros borderline hoping to cross into the European Union. In response, Greece closed its borders, Greek security forces were deployed to prevent people from entering the country and reports emerged of escalated practices of pushbacks and arrests of new arrivals.

The media has played a central role in establishing the framework for the Greek public discourse about migration. That being said, overall, media representations of migration in Greece can be discerned in different periods, as discussed in the following paragraphs.

Early years (1990 – 2010):

The construction of stereotypical notions about migration

In the early 1990s, when the first influx of migrants arrived in Greece, migration was portrayed by the Greek media as a ‘threat’ for social cohesion and for the prosperity of Greek society. In fact, as Kountouri has noted, since the 1990s, both the choice of news about migrants and the way they were portrayed in the media were crucial to the construction of the stereotypical notions that accompanied their entry into Greece (Kountouri, 2008).

By the end of this first period, conversely, and throughout the first half of the 2000s, Greek society began to reflect in a calmer manner on the issue of migration and to seek more effective policy solutions for it. This was subsequently reflected in the media dis-

course about migration, which seemed to significantly reduce the association between migration and crime (Karydis, 2016).

In the late 2000s, however, the stereotype of the poor and dangerous Albanian or the Balkan 'other' lost its dominant position in Greek media representations to gradually give way to the term *lathrometanastis* (the clandestine, illegal migrant), mainly of African or Asian origin.

2011 – 2014:

Migration as an exceptional crisis within the financial crisis

The outbreak of the Greek financial crisis signalled a new era for the representation of migration in the Greek media. Starting from the onset of the crisis, in 2010, migration climbed up the political and news agenda and was portrayed as an 'urgent domestic problem' and an 'exceptional crisis within the financial crisis in Greece', negatively affecting almost every aspect of the Greek society – represented as a problem for tourism, trade, the economy, public services and even for the country's relationship with the EU (Kalfeli et al., 2020). At the same time, migration was portrayed, during the Greek financial crisis, as a major threat to security and public health caused by the 'massive influx of illegal migrants', threatening to tear the country's social fabric (Konstantinidou, 2014) and thus requiring domestic decisions and measures – of a police or enforcement nature – to be solved.

2015:

From 'illegals' to 'unfortunates'

The 2015 refugee crisis marked a significant change in media coverage of migration and asylum seeking. In fact, during the summer of 2015, the Greek media began to truly reflect on the international dimension of migration and speak of an 'international humanitarian issue' and a 'European refugee crisis' (not a domestic Greek crisis anymore), bringing to the surface the question of 'responsibility sharing, solidarity and the function of the Common European Asylum System' (Dimitriadi & Sarantaki, 2018, p. 3).

At the same time, as the drama of thousands of people arriving on the Greek shores unfolded, refugees and migrants were rarely portrayed in media outlets as a threat to Greek society (Kalfeli, 2020). Similarly, during the 2015 crisis, refugees were indeed more often portrayed as 'victims', as people in need and at risk, and stereotypes of migration as a threat were often replaced by representations of compassion and sympathy. Moreover, another drastic shift took place, as the term *lathrometanastis* (illegal migrant), used by almost all media outlets in the previous years, now appeared rarely in the news stories and was replaced by the term *prosfygas* (refugee).

These changes were probably due to various factors: the rise of more sympathetic approaches in European political and media discourse towards refugees; changes in the status of asylum seekers and the categories of persons entering Greece, with more children and families arriving every day; or changes in Greek policy, as a result of a left-wing government. However, and although the 2015 refugee crisis brought significant changes in media coverage of migration, there was not a total shift. In the end, the

media failed to humanize migrants and refugees as it 'perpetuated the ambivalence of the refugee as either a sufferer or a threat, yet never a human' (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017).

2020:

Enemies at the gates of Greece and Europe

In 2020, five years after the 2015 European refugee crisis, media framing of the Greek–Turkish border crisis in Evros was again quite different. Coated in a nationalistic rhetoric (Dimitriadi, 2020), the crisis in Evros was represented in the Greek public discourse as a field of conflict between two old enemies, Turkey and Greece, and the border crisis was portrayed as putting Greece's national sovereignty at risk and requiring defensive measures to protect the country against a massive invasion of refugees and migrants. Within this context, and as official sources dominated media coverage, the Greek borders were portrayed as Europe's external borders and Greece was portrayed as 'Europe's shield', [after the words used by the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen](#), not only protecting Greece's national sovereignty but also European territory and values. In turn, refugees and migrants were represented in media discourse through a dual representation of threat and dehumanization: first, as 'enemies at the gate' (Esses et al., 2013) with regard to Greece and Europe, as invaders and a threat to national security; and second, as less human, as 'powerful weapons', 'pawns' and 'tools' in the hands of Turkey.

At the same time, though, one of the most interesting observations that diachronic and comparative analyses of media framing regarding migration in Greece have revealed over the past decade (Kalfeli, 2020; Kalfeli et al., 2020) was that some aspects of migration were repeated in media coverage regardless of the time period. For example, migrant voices were systematically absent in media coverage. And, in parallel, although refugees and migrants were voiceless, they were highly visible through pictures that mostly depicted them in stereotypical ways, portraying them as 'boat people' and as masses walking along the motorways of the Balkan route (Chouliaraki, 2017). At the same time, human stories were represented in very few cases. Although refugees and migrants were very often depicted as a mass, in very few cases were they represented as individuals. Focusing on the battle against 'illegal migration' and on 'the risks it posed for the security of Greek society' or on the 'unstoppable flows', very few Greek media outlets highlighted the benefits of migration over time. Anchored in the discourse and the agenda of official sources, the selected newspapers failed to give voice to non-elite sources that would discuss the underlying causes of, or possible solutions to, migration. Consequently, while there were extensive references to 'border security', little or no space was devoted to addressing the issue of 'human security' and the contractual obligations of Greece and Europe for international protection of asylum seekers, revealing an often ethnocentric and Eurocentric approach by the media, and rarely a human rights or law-centred one.

MAIN FEATURES OF THE CONTEMPORARY MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN GREECE

The Greek media system is primarily characterized by the concentration of media ownership in a few hands and the close relationships between media owners and the political power. In fact, the country's leading news media houses belong to business groups owned by powerful entrepreneurs whose main activities focus on sectors of the economy other than the media industry (e.g. shipping), and who have a long tradition of political clientelism and of using the media as a means to exert pressure on political actors in order to promote their business interests. Papathanassopoulos (2001: 519) has called it a model of "interplay between media owners and political power centers and the battle for control of the public agenda".

Despite concentration of media ownership, this small- to medium-sized European country contains a wealth of media outlets, with more than the Greek audience can consume, as there has been an oversupply of newspapers (despite low readership), television channels and radio stations, which suffer severe competition to attract both audiences and the advertising industry. During the last decade, in particular, the scale of the competition was further expanded because of successive crises that Greek society went through, affecting advertising revenues.

The Greek financial crisis in the 2010s brought about a large decline in advertising revenues. This decline, further combined with people's lack of willingness to pay for news, soon resulted in the closing down of numerous media outlets in Greece.

Recently, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic imposed a significant pressure on the media sector. Although the lockdown resulted in an increase in the consumption of news, advertising revenue declined considerably. Today, all media outlets are facing their most difficult times ever, with the print media suffering the most (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2021).

Apart from the challenges experienced by the Greek media industry itself, negative developments in press freedom and low trust in the news media further threaten the existence of legacy media organizations. Having said that, in 2021, [only 32% of Greeks expressed trust towards the media](#). Despite an increase of four percentage points, Greece is still well behind most other countries concerning trust, according to the 2021 Reuters Institute Digital News Report. At the same time, the annual [World Press Freedom Index for 2021, published by Reporters Without Borders \(RSF\), placed the country in 70th place \(out of 180 countries\) in regard to press freedom](#), dropping five places compared to 2020.

Pluralism, source use and whose voices are heard are all crucial aspects of constructing a balanced and more nuanced viewpoint in a news story (Cooper et al, 2021). Having said that, journalism in Greece is characterized by a uniform use of sources. Investigative journalism happens but it is the exception instead of the rule (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2021). Although investigative journalism is recognized, as a task of great importance by leading news media organizations in Greece, structural constraints that shape and limit the work of journalists have limited the potential of newsrooms to perform

their watchdog activities systematically. These constraints include lack of financial resources since the period of recession, the suffocating process of news production and high-speed newsrooms, limited staff, heavy workloads, and poor wages, among other aspects.

That being said, the Greek media mostly uses the elites as sources, while important minority segments of the population experience deep inequalities of representation and access to the media (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2021). In fact, journalists' lack of training and understanding of diversity-related issues remains one of the main issues that Greek media professionals need to address.

METHOD

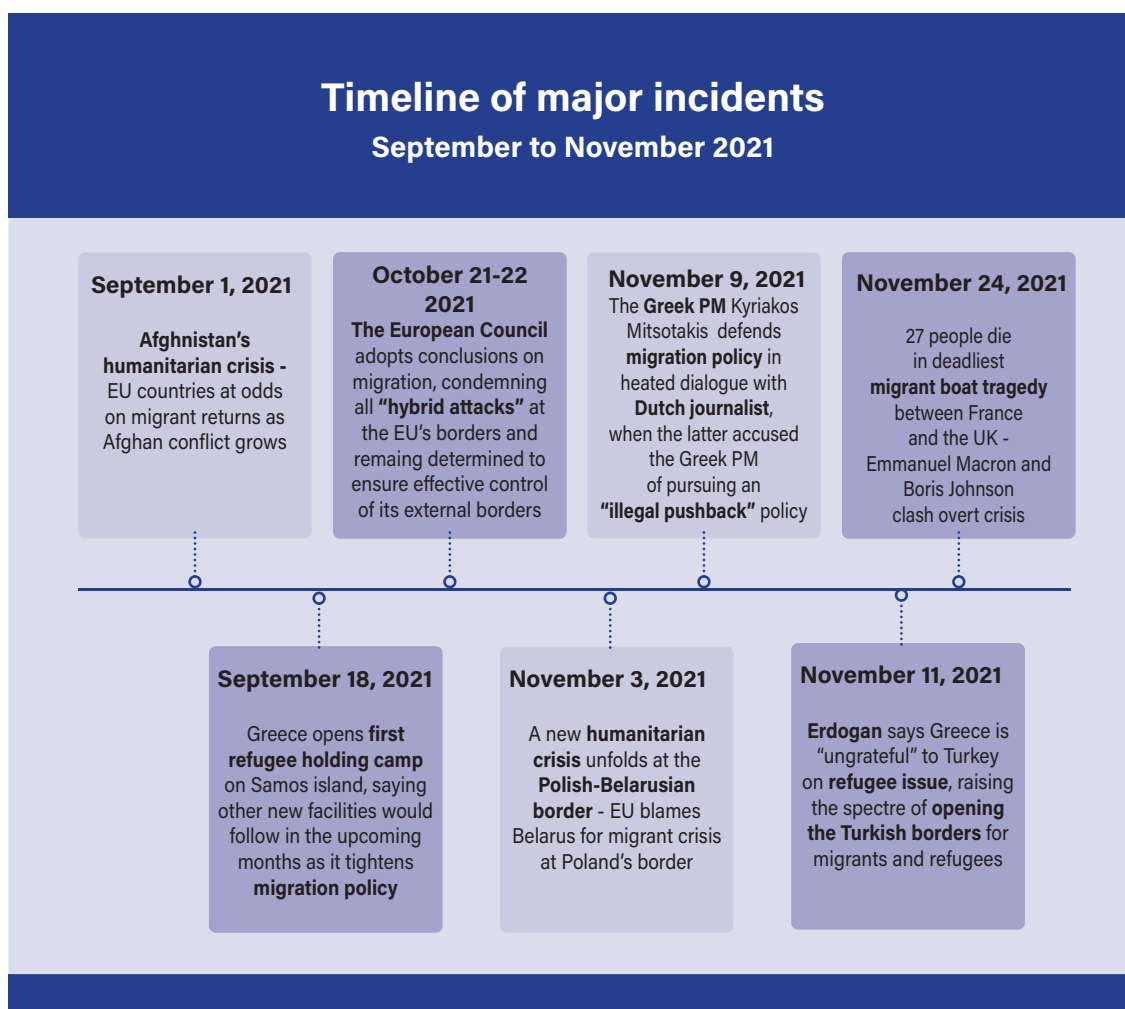
This study applied a content analysis method to examine news coverage of migration and asylum seeking in the Greek media during a three-month period in 2021. Using this approach, two independent trained coders coded a significant number of news texts and images by using a standardized measurement instrument (a codebook).

News stories were collected from eight Greek media outlets. Specifically, from the online versions of six newspapers — Efsyn (left-wing), Ta Nea (centre-left), I Kathimerini (centre-right), Proto Thema (populist, tabloid), Eleftheros Typos (right), Makeleio (far-right, tabloid) — and the two news websites iefimerida (liberal-conservative) and zougla (populist). The criteria used to select the different media outlets were first, their circulation or ranking rates (according to Alexa ranking) and second, their political affiliation in a way that would represent the dominant political spectrum. To reach conclusions about contemporary news coverage of migration and asylum seeking in the Greek media, we used purposive sampling (Krippendorff, 2004) to select a recent period focusing on news stories published between 1 September and 30 November 2021. Overall, we used 48 categories for content analysis of news text and image. These categories were employed to explore different aspects of media representation of migration and asylum seeking and, more concisely, other features such as: the sources of information used (official sources, other media sources, international organizations and NGOs, common people, refugees and migrants, other sources); approach (the European dimension), threat and dehumanization; conflict; solutions; stereotypes; human stories; and reference to nationality and language, including the terms used (refugees, migrants, asylum seekers) to describe people who are on the move. Most of these main categories — and their subcategories — also reveal the prevalence of a negative or a positive news coverage of migration and asylum seeking in the Greek media.

Based on the above-mentioned categories, the two independent coders coded a total number of 1,040 news stories. The individual story, including news stories, feature stories and opinion pieces, was the unit of analysis. Most news stories were collected from Proto Thema (216), followed by zougla (201), Efsyn (167), iefimerida (151), Kathimerini (146), Makeleio (64), Ta Nea (49) and Eleftheros Typos (46).

FINDINGS: CURRENT MEDIA COVERAGE OF MIGRATION AND ASYLUM SEEKING IN GREECE

The following section summarizes the main findings of this study. Within this context, the section reveals (a) the most covered topics, (b) the most and least salient features of media coverage and (c) the variations and similarities in the different media outlets.

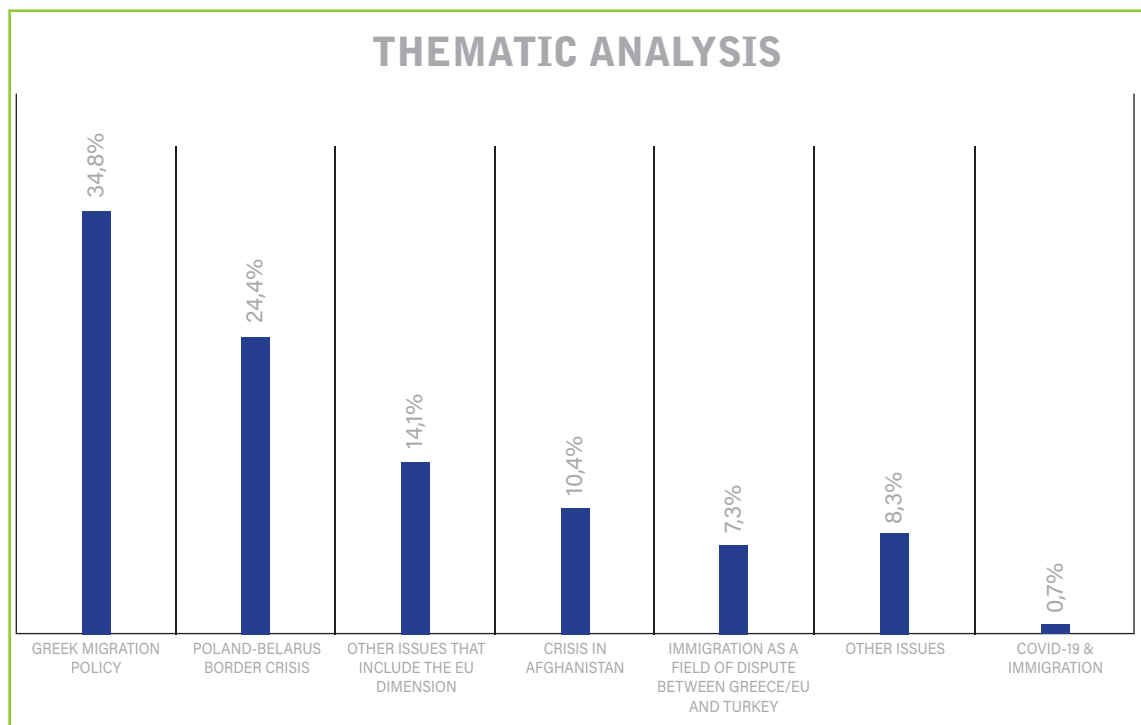


THEMATIC FOCAL POINTS

Chart 1 shows which topics dominated media coverage during the period under review. Our research revealed that Greek migration policies and restrictive measures of border control and enforcement (border security measures, extension of the fence on the Greek–Turkish border, pushbacks, closed holding camps, etc.), together with the border crisis between Poland and Belarus, were the most covered topics during the period of study (34.8% and 24.4% of news stories, respectively).

Another frequently covered topic, especially in September 2021, was the crisis in Afghanistan (10.4%), with news stories mainly focusing on Member States' positions on the Afghanistan crisis, including the Greek position, and the possibility of an increase in migration movements.

Although a European approach was reflected in the vast majority of news stories (including stories about Afghanistan and the Poland–Belarus crisis), other specific issues reflecting an EU dimension were also quite frequent (14.1%), such as European migration policies, the English Channel crisis, the situation of migration in other European countries, shipwrecks in the Mediterranean Sea (e.g. Italy), discussions at the European Union level or among European leaders, and discussions about the Migration and Asylum Pact. Migration was portrayed as a field of dispute between Greece/EU and Turkey in 7.3% of news stories. Other issues, such as human stories, rescue operations, actions or initiatives for refugees and migrants, and other individual events that could not fall thematically into the above categories within the Greek context, covered 8.3% of news stories. Although COVID-19 was still of major concern in people's daily lives, during the period under review, there were almost no news stories at all revealing the challenges faced by refugees and migrants in regard to vaccination, education and hygiene (which is particularly hard to maintain inside the camps).



THE MOST AND LEAST SALIENT FEATURES OF MEDIA COVERAGE

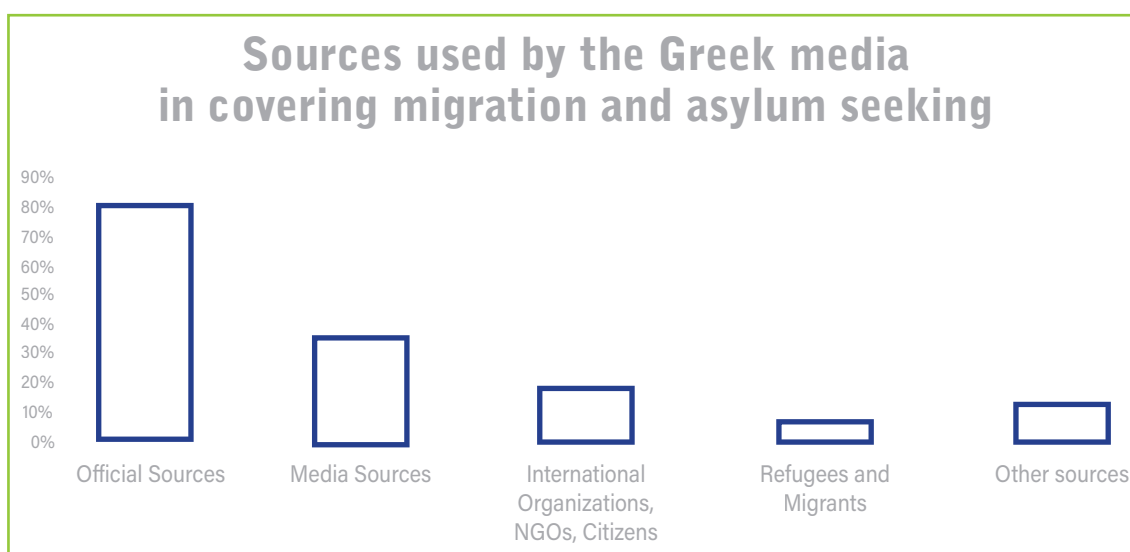
The following sections demonstrate the most and least frequently covered features of migration and asylum seeking in the Greek media, both negative and positive.

ELITE-ORIENTED vs PEOPLE-ORIENTED

As evidenced by our research findings, the media were primarily concerned with the discourse and behaviour of politicians and the measures taken by them. This was evidenced by three different features studied: focus on official sources, focus on the measures taken by politicians and pictures portraying politicians. Official sources (Greek and European politicians, police and military officers, elites) were used in 80.7% of all news stories. Other media sources were used in 35.7% of all news stories. At the same time, focus on the elites was enhanced by the fact that more than one-third (36.3%) of the news stories that included a photo showcased Greek and European politicians (e.g. politicians debating on whether to accept refugees and migrants into the country), thus shifting the focus toward political debate.

In contrast, a multi-party approach (the voice of international organizations, NGOs or citizens) was used in 18.3% of news stories, while refugee and migrant voices, namely the voices of those at the centre of the story, appeared in only 6.5% of news stories. Similarly, human stories that represent refugees and migrants as individuals with a name and specific characteristics, or with emotions, hopes and goals, were traced in only 4.9% of news stories.

Finally, refugees and migrants were very often (72.2%) portrayed in pictures as a mass of people without specific characteristics, whereas portraits or photos that depicted them as individuals were rare (14.9%).



BORDER SECURITY vs HUMAN SECURITY

Consequently, as official sources dominated media discourse, restrictive measures of border control and surveillance — shielding European borders with armed forces (for example, in Greece, Poland and Spain), extending the fence that separates Greece from neighbouring Turkey, closed holding camps and even illegal pushback procedures — were very often represented (in 70.9% of news stories) as solutions to migration and asylum seeking.

In contrast, solutions based on human rights, such as relocation and resettlement efforts, humanitarian visas to effectively close the backdoor to dangerous migration routes, and migration routes to Greece and Europe that are both safe and legal for people in need of international protection, appeared in only 15.6% of all news stories.

Anchored in the discourse and the agenda of official sources, the media under study failed to highlight the various problems revolving around migration during this period. At a time during which Greece was accused by several international organizations and NGOs of illegal pushbacks, only one-quarter of news stories spoke of inequalities and discrimination stemming from state structures and practices (for example, illegal pushbacks at the sea). These were much more evident in the left-wing Efsyn than in the rest of the newspapers, appearing in 70.7% of Efsyn's news stories instead of an average of 26.3% across all media outlets. That being said, media discourse in other media outlets, [as the following extract shows](#), often presented allegations of pushbacks as fake news coming from the Turkish side.

Turkish refugee games continue, after the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan. This time it was the Turkish news agency Anadolu, again circulating non-existent allegations about pushbacks of migrants from Greece, which it accuses of ill-treatment, distorting the truth. (Ta Nea, 16/9/21)

Although COVID-19 was of major concern in people's daily lives at the time, there were almost no news stories at all revealing the challenges faced by refugees and migrants in regard to social distancing, sanitation and hygiene, despite [scientific evidence](#) that, "compared to the general population, the risk of COVID-19 infection among refugees and asylum seekers in reception facilities was 2.5 to 3 times higher". Very few news stories (only 3 out of 1,040) reported on the obstacles faced by migrants and refugees regarding the vaccination process against COVID-19 and the extremely low percentage of vaccinated people among them. Very few news stories (only 3 out of 1,040 in all media) reported on the obstacles faced by thousands of [child refugees and migrants, who were excluded from education due to restrictions imposed by the pandemic](#).

PORTRAYALS OF THREAT AND DEHUMANIZATION

Refugees and migrants were often portrayed in the selected media outlets through a

dual representation of threat and dehumanization. In 76.7% out of 1,040 news stories, refugees and migrants were dehumanized in the selected Greek media discourse by being represented as subjects without human traits and as resources (to be exploited). In particular, refugees and migrants were portrayed as (a) 'powerful weapons' (weaponization of migration) and 'pawns' or 'tools' in the hands of Belarus and Turkey (instrumentalization of migration), (b) statistics or a mass of people without voice, names and emotions, and (c) unethical cheaters — not the real refugees (now from Afghanistan)³ but 'illegal migrants' using all means to cheat the system and break through into the EU.

As long as it is not safe to send Afghans back to their homeland, migrants from other countries may be tempted to show up as Afghans to cross into the EU. ([Zougla, 8/9/21](#))

At the same time, 39.4% of news stories portrayed refugees and migrants as a 'threat' to national and European security and as 'invaders' and 'enemies at the gates' of Europe executing a 'hybrid attack' against EU Member States. In the case of the far-right Makeleio, this was expressed through a volatile combination of framing migration as both a realistic threat to public security and a symbolic threat to cultural identity and religion, by also referring to differences in the values held between Greeks and migrants.

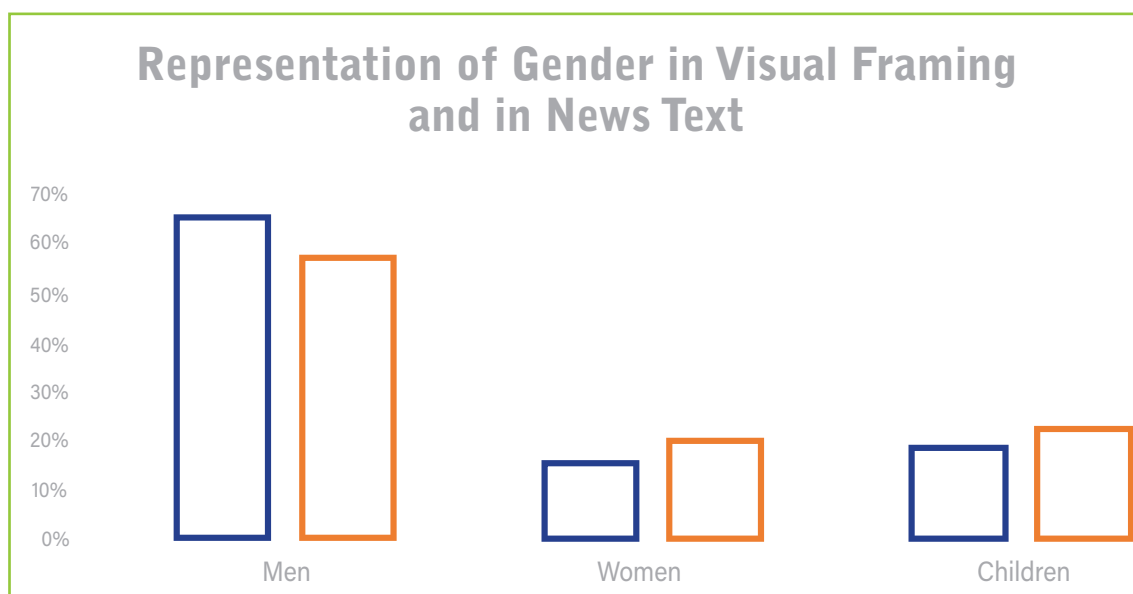
They are invading from everywhere! Greece at the mercy of Muslims! Fear and terror in Rodopi Mountain! Illegal migrants (lathrometanastes) barge in the homes of the elderly. ([Makeleio, 22/10/21](#))

These threat and dehumanization frames were further enhanced by a warfare and natural disaster vocabulary, applied in 40.6% of news stories, using words and phrases such as 'war', 'invasion', 'battle', 'attack' or 'waves', as evidenced by the following extract from Kathimerini:

Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia have condemned "the deliberate escalation of the Belarusian regime's continuing hybrid attack, which poses a serious threat to European security", citing allegations that Minsk is using migrants as a weapon. ([Kathimerini, 11/11/21](#))

3. Only one year earlier, though, Afghans were considered to be illegal migrants trying to break through the EU border and only Syrians were considered to be the real refugees. For example, an 2020 article from Proto Thema was titled "Migration, Evros: Putting a "Stop" to 37,000 illegal entries in Greece - 252 arrests, only ten from Syria! - The detainees in Evros come mainly from Afghanistan and Pakistan". ([Proto Thema, 5/3/20](#))

Another aspect we examined was whether reporting on migration and asylum seeking was Europeanized by: (1) involving EU-wide speakers, (2) portraying it as a field of dispute between EU countries and third countries, or (3) featuring familiar frames of reference across borders, in which national frontiers were portrayed as Europe’s external borders. Results indicate a European dimension and approach was present in 64.7% of all news stories; this means that migration and asylum seeking was also represented in Greek media discourse as a European issue, while Greece —and other Member States such as Poland — were portrayed as the external border of Europe and ‘Europe’s shield’, not only protecting their national sovereignty, but also European territory and values.



— PORTRAYAL OF REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS: PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS, TERMINOLOGY AND VISUAL FRAMING

About one-third (29%) of the media coverage during our study period related to individuals from Afghanistan. These were followed at a considerable distance by people from Syria (13%), Iraq (8.7%), Pakistan (3.8%), Somalia (1.9%) and other countries (6.3%). Although the portrayal of people originating from Afghanistan largely corresponded to the actual number of Afghan sea arrivals in Greece in 2021 (26%) (UNHCR Operational Data Portal, as of December 2021), other nationalities were not portrayed accurately and were largely underrepresented in media coverage. This was especially the case for individuals who originated from Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (representing 15.9% and 9%, respectively, of the actual number of arrivals), both countries with long-running, ongoing conflicts. Most importantly, because Greek officials claimed, during the period under review, that the majority of new arrivals come from safe countries (see the ‘Current Situation in Greece’ section above), the Greek media, due to a lack of context and understanding of the situation in the

countries of origin, failed to contribute to social dialogue and identify the vulnerability of people coming from fragile regions; almost none of the news stories in our sample examined the background situation regarding the countries of origin of people entering Greece (with the exception of Afghanistan).

The reporting was predominantly about adult male refugees and migrants. This was especially true for visual representations. Over the entire period of study, about 65.6% of news images of refugees and migrants showed adult men, while 15.6% depicted women and 18.8% children. In text, 57.2% of news stories were about adult men, 20.3% were about women and 22.5% were about children. This distribution does not correspond to the distribution of age and gender of those who entered Greece in 2021, because (as we have shown in the 'Current Situation in Greece' section], men represented 51.6% of the total population who arrived in the country in 2021. This means that the media in question reported disproportionately on adult males. News stories that mentioned gender concerning refugees and migrants were mostly related to the crisis in Afghanistan, after the Taliban seized power, and cases in which women refugees were victims of shipwrecks. Similarly, news stories with a reference to children were mostly related to the relocation of unaccompanied minors and cases where children were victims of shipwrecks.

We then took the pictures of refugees and migrants and analysed them in more detail with regard to the respective situation of the depiction (visual framing). In particular, we measured the depiction of refugees and migrants in 'states of exception' and emergency situations (e.g. images of the borders, of sea rescues and boat people, of camps and police/military interventions) (Agamben, 2005), because these images maintain the connection of refugees and migrants with problematic situations, not allowing the audience to identify with the stories of these people. In the end, no matter how deep their misfortune has been, they remain distant and alien (Chouliaraki, 2006). The analyses show that images of refugees and migrants in 'states of exception' clearly dominated. Out of 450 news stories that included pictures of refugees and migrants (since many news stories portrayed politicians and images of the police), 92.5% portrayed them in 'states of exception'. This involved sea rescues in the Aegean Sea, as well as refugees and migrants in camps, behind wired fences and at the border between Poland and Belarus.

Another dimension that is particularly important to how refugees and migrants are presumably perceived by the general population is how people who come to Greece are referred to in the media (verbal framing and terminology). We explored different terms, such as 'migrants', describing people not 'at high risk' but people who have chosen to move, and formulations that emphasize people's need for protection, such as 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers'. We then sought to examine which of the terms were predominantly used in media coverage.

The analysis shows that the term "migrants" dominated in 62.1% of all news stories. The term "refugees" was used in 46.7% of all news stories and the term "asylum seekers" was used in 12.2% of all news stories. The terms "illegal migrants" and "clandestine migrants" (*lathrometanastis*) were used in 7.6% of news stories (3.8% and 3.8%, respectively).

VARIATIONS AND SIMILARITIES BETWEEN DIFFERENT MEDIA OUTLETS

Content analysis revealed significant variations in how refugees and migrants were portrayed in the selected media outlets, including language use and stereotypes. At the same time, results point out important commonalities in how migration and asylum seeking is represented, most notably the dominance of political elites as sources across all media content and the absence of refugee and migrant voices.

The most significant variations were detected between media outlets with different political orientations, as results indicated that political affiliation (left or right) are important to how often negative or positive indicators appear. Overall, the portrayal of refugees and migrants in the reporting of the left-wing Efsyn was significantly less negative than in the rest of the media outlets, especially, the far-right, tabloid Makeleio, representing a 'hate reporting' approach.

In particular, inequalities stemming from state structures and practices (for example, illegal pushbacks at the sea) were much more evident in the left-wing Efsyn than in the rest of the newspapers, appearing in 70.7% of Efsyn's news stories, as opposed to an average of 26.3% across all media outlets. At the same time, migration and asylum seeking was strongly politicized in the left-wing Efsyn, where focus on political conflict appeared in 43.7% of the news stories, as opposed to of an average of 13.5% across all outlets. Leaning toward the left and the opposition, this is also Efsyn's way to target the conservative government of New Democracy.

At the same time, though, and in accordance with our previous research, our current study revealed important similarities in news coverage between media outlets. Most notably, as discussed above, there was a dominance of official sources across all media outlets (ranging from 78% in Efsyn to 89% in Kathimerini and iefimerida), as most of the time, political elites are the only source of information. Moreover, there was a significant absence of refugee and migrant voices in all media outlets (between 3% in Makeleio and Zougla and 11% in Kathimerini or 12% in Efsyn). Similarly, there was rarely a focus on the individual human story (ranging from 0% in Makeleio to 6% in Efsyn, 8% in Ta Nea and 9% in Kathimerini). Vulnerability of refugees and migrants (e.g. portraying them not as a 'hygienic bomb' (a phrase often used to describe migrants as a threat to public health) but as a vulnerable group in need of protection) was rare (between 2% in Makeleio and 13% in Efsyn). Migration was rarely represented as a benefit (ranging from 0% in most media outlets to 1% in Efsyn and 2% in Kathimerini). Discussions over integration of refugees and migrants were stressed in very few news stories (between 0% in Eleftheros Typos and 6% in Efsyn). These similarities between media outlets of different political affiliation reveal a set of patterns in media coverage that remain unchallenged.

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Migration and asylum seeking have been among the most controversial topics on the Greek policy agenda and one of the principal issues that shape public discourse in Greece (Kalfeli, 2020). In around three decades, from the early 1990s to the present, Greece changed from a migrant-sending to a migrant-receiving country, and then to a transit country during the 2000s, for refugees and migrants who did not intend to stay in the country but to move to Northern and Central European countries. Situated at the crossroads of three continents (Europe, Asia and Africa), Greece has become, since the early 2000s, a major gateway into the European Union for asylum seekers and migrants from Asia and Africa, with 2015 being the year in which almost one million people crossed the Greek borders to reach European safety.

The media has played a significant role in how this complex issue is presented, as well as in how people perceive and respond to it. For many people around the globe, the media are the sole 'window' to the world of minorities or refugees and migrants. In Greece, overall, the media have been crucial to the construction of stereotypical notions about refugees and migrants, by mainly portraying them as threats to Greece's security and prosperity. Despite a brief interval of sympathy and compassion, during the 2015 crisis, refugees and migrants were at large portrayed in the Greek media through a dual representation of threat and dehumanization. Moreover, tough migration policies and strong borders were clearly reflected in media discourse, especially from 2020 onwards, when refugees and migrants were portrayed as enemies at the gates of Greece and Europe, and as weapons in the hands of Turkey (Kalfeli et al., 2022).

This study has offered a quantitative content analysis of the coverage of migration and asylum seeking in eight Greek media outlets (Efsyn, Ta Nea, I Kathimerini, Proto Thema, Eleftheros Typos, Makeleio, iefimerida and zougla) between September and November 2021, a period that begins with discussions among European leaders over the crisis in Afghanistan and the risk of a massive influx of people seeking protection in Europe, and ends with the border crisis between Poland and Belarus.

The findings of this quantitative content analysis revealed, in accordance with our previous research (Kalfeli et al., 2022), that official sources prevail across all media outlets, as most of the time political elites and authority voices are the sole source of information in a news story. In contrast, non-elite sources, such as international organizations, citizens and, especially, refugees and migrants themselves, are rare in all media outlets (Kalfeli, 2020; Kalfeli et al., 2020). The use of sources in the news, though, and whose voices are heard, are fundamental to constructing a balanced and more nuanced viewpoint in a news story. By failing to give refugees and migrants a voice, the media marginalize those at the centre of the story and privilege politicians and public officials, as well as their narrative (Cooper et al., 2021).

As a consequence of official sources dominating media discourse, measures of border control and surveillance — shielding the European borders, setting limitations to arrivals, encouraging returns or inaugurating closed holding camps for migrants and refu-

gees — are very often represented as solutions to mass migration. In contrast, solutions based on human rights (such as humanitarian visas, relocation and resettlement) were detected in a small percentage of news stories. The representation of border control measures as solutions to migration, combined with a robust absence of the representation of sustainable, long-term and coherent solutions based on human rights, ultimately functions to obscure the necessity for safe and legal migration routes (Parker et al., 2021) to Greece and Europe.

Although overtly racist discourses may be absent in most news discourse (with the exception of Makeleio), this in no way means it has disappeared, but rather that it has transformed into a new kind of discrimination that is hidden under the cover of undisputed journalistic patterns. For example, as researchers have pointed out in the past (Benson, 2013), by adopting the agenda and discourse of the elites, the media frame migration through a narrative of 'illegality' and 'control', which reflects the arguments made by politicians and governments.

Within this context, by mainly choosing authority sources and by following the discourse of the elites, domestic media have largely reproduced the official sources' narrative of refugees and migrants as a threat to security, invaders and enemies at the gates of Member States (Poland and Greece) and the EU. Similarly, news stories dehumanized refugees and migrants by representing them as subjects without human traits (weapons or pawns) and as resources (to be exploited).

Moreover, content analysis has revealed, also in accordance with our previous research (Kalfeli, 2020; Kalfeli et al., 2020, 2022), significant variations in how refugees and migrants were portrayed by the selected media outlets. Results indicate that political orientation (left or right) is important to how often negative or positive — towards migration — indicators appear. During a period, for example, in which Greece was accused by several NGOs and international organizations of illegal pushbacks, it was mainly the left-wing Efsyn that discussed this topic, while other media outlets presented allegations on pushbacks as fake news coming from Turkey.

At the same time, results point out important commonalities in how migration and asylum seeking is represented. Significantly, as already noted, there is a bias towards political elites as sources and an absence of refugee and migrant voices across all media content. Similarly, as refugees and migrants are very often portrayed as a mass, there is rarely a focus on the individual human story, with their lack of voice and humanity leading to their symbolic annihilation (Yucel, 2021). Reference to the vulnerability of people entering Greece is very infrequent, as news stories fail to identify fragile countries of origin and to contribute to social dialogue by debunking the idea that new arrivals come from safe countries. News stories about integration of refugees and migrants or cases of people who are well integrated into Greek society were rare. Potential economic, social and cultural benefits stemming from migration were scarce in media discourse. Very few news stories, across all media outlets, focused on the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants, although this group of people has been among the most affected by the pandemic. Refugees and migrants are systematically portrayed in media coverage and, in particular, in visual framing in 'situations of exception', which may have negative effects on the public's opinions, perceptions and attitudes towards them. After all, these 'conditions of exception' end up becoming inherent of the culture of refugees

and migrants themselves and this creates a hierarchy of human life as migrants are interpreted as distant aliens (Chouliaraki, 2006).

These common features were detected regardless of the political orientation of the media outlet, which implies that there is a set of patterns present, some blind spots in media coverage or aspects that are almost never touched upon, resulting in an often poor and simplistic approach regarding the representation of migration and asylum seeking in the Greek media.

For this to change, media professionals need to address their lack of training and understanding of diversity-related issues and broaden journalistic practices to include non-elite sources that will enrich media content. Constructive or peace journalism approaches suggest a more balanced reporting that also focuses on positive, non-conventional aspects of representation (such as non-elite sources, human stories, human rights solutions, etc.). Having said that, fundamental changes in journalistic practices are required toward this goal. Within this context, recommendations for action could be directed toward two distinct routes: a scientific and an applied one.

From a scientific point of view, our findings give rise to further research. For example, an important research goal would be to survey journalists and media professionals with the aim of understanding the contemporary journalistic culture and environment (knowledge of diversity-related issues, available resources, working hours, deadlines, restrictions, etc.) in which Greek journalists cover migration and asylum issues.

From the point of view of an applied intervention, a media literacy programme could be implemented. Within this context, a series of workshops with journalists could be carried out. The general objective of the workshops would be to empower journalists and media professionals to examine their reporting patterns and improve media coverage of migration and asylum issues, by helping them to better analyse media content, make them aware of the impact of their work on people's perceptions and attitudes towards migrants and refugees, and shape a new information landscape that will reduce the scope for intolerant media representations.

At the same time, another important objective is the understanding of journalistic patterns on behalf of the audience. For this to happen, tailor-made media literacy interventions are suggested, with the aim of empowering the general audience — and especially young people — to critically consume media content, as well as understand and manage the potential effects of stereotypical media representations.

In the coming years, migration will continue to be a challenge for Greece, Europe and the developed world. Climate change, poverty, wars and conflicts will continue and likely increase (Dimitriadi, 2020). Within this framework, the media will continue to play an important role in preparing the ground for social dialogue around migration and asylum seeking. To do this effectively, media professionals need to sharpen their tools to enrich media coverage, by portraying a broader and richer view of what is already known about migration and asylum seeking.

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Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Greece

3 Aristotelous, 54624, Thessaloniki, Greece

Contact: Neda Noraie-Kia, Head of Migration Policy Europe
Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Greece

E neda.noraie-kia@gr.boell.org

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