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European Migration Crisis: on the Special Relationship between Media, Political Institutions and Public Opinion

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Abstract

Since 2011, dealing with migration has become a serious challenge for the EU and its Member States. As a matter of fact, migrants and refugees arriving in Europe from Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia have presented European leaders and policymakers with their greatest challenge since the debt crisis. Assuming the perspective of the 'mediatisation of politics', according to which today political institutions are considerably dependent on and shaped by mass media, I will argue that this is particularly relevant and true for the migration phenomenon. In particular, this article aims to present the relation of interdependence between the media, the general public and political institutions. To demonstrate this relation it is essential to understand that the hierarchization of specific issues, the choice of a certain lexicon, of a frame of narration – that is the schema of interpretation that the media give to the facts and political issues – and the decision to report or omit some data and information, may have consequences on the way events are perceived by the general public and on the responses that the society expects by political actors. For this purpose, the first section of the article will concentrate on the role that the media have in the construction of political reality, on the frames that characterize the representation of migration by the media and on their impact on the public attitude on immigration. In the second section, a case study on news reported on the Italian media will be presented in order to demonstrate the interdependence between the media, political institutions and the public opinion.

Keywords: *media, migration, mediatisation of politics, frames*

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Introduction

According to the perspective of the *mediatisation of politics* (Mazzoleni 1998), today political institutions are considerably dependent on and shaped by mass media. This seems to be particularly relevant and true for the migration phenomenon, which has become increasingly controversial in the European Union context. Dramatic events such as shipwrecks in the Mediterranean and terrorism threats have coloured political debates and public perception. As a matter of fact, dealing with migration has become a serious challenge for the EU and its Member States. Migrants and refugees arriving in Europe from Africa, the Middle East and South Asia have presented European leaders and policymakers with their greatest challenge since the debt crisis. The International Organization for Migration calls Europe the most dangerous destination for irregular migration in the world, and the Mediterranean the world's most dangerous border crossing[1]. The number of illegal border-crossing observations in the EU started to surge in 2011, with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, and followed with ongoing violence and instability in origin countries, the deterioration of conditions in countries of first asylum, lack of opportunities to work or enrol in schools for most refugees and geopolitical changes in countries like Libya that before were a possible destination. Europe is currently witnessing a mixed migration phenomenon, in which economic migrants and asylum seekers travel together.

In this scenario, it would be naïve to analyse the European response to migration without considering how it is pictured by the media. In fact, we can imagine a circle in which facts and political decisions are the source of the production of news and at the same time those who take political decisions have to take into consideration how the media will represent their actions and the events that originate them. Within this circle there is also the general public, whose perception of reality is influenced by the media and who is the main addressee of political decisions. Therefore, this article aims to present the relation of interdependence between the media, the general public and political institutions. To demonstrate this relation it is essential to understand that the hierarchization of specific issues, the choice of a certain lexicon, of a frame of narration – that is the schema of interpretation that the media give to the facts and political issues – and the decision to report or omit some data and information, may have consequences on the way events

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[1]   Between 2014 and 2018, more than 17,900 people died or went missing in the Mediterranean, among them more than 15,000 died along the central Mediterranean route, that is between North Africa and Italy (IOM 2019).

are perceived by the general public and on the responses that the society expects by political actors.

For this purpose, the first section of the article will concentrate on the role that the media have in the construction of political reality, on the *frames* that characterize the representation of migration by the media and on their impact on the public attitude on immigration. In the second section, a case study on news reported on the Italian media will be presented in order to demonstrate the interdependence between the media, political institutions and the public opinion.

1. Media and Construction of Political Reality

Media play an important role in the construction of the system of the meanings that individuals internalize. If we focus on the first part of the communication process, that is the sender that shapes reality and on the implications of its activity, we can distinguish three categories of *political reality*:

> 1. Objective reality, that is events, people, actions (like law or decisions of the government); 2. Subjective reality, the same reality but as perceived by actors and spectators, and 3. Constructed reality, that is the events that become visible, perceptible and therefore assume sense only inasmuch 'covered' by mass media (Mazzoleni 1998, 81).

From this distinction made by Mazzoleni we can infer that *constructed reality* is the result of the visibility and representation that mass media give to objective reality. So, given that media coverage can transform a marginal topic into a relevant one, the representation of objective reality influences not only the main receiver of information, which is the general public, but also political actors.

When choosing which news to report and how to do that, the media always follow certain logic. Indeed, Altheide and Snow (1979, 179) use the concept of 'media logic' to identify the specific frame of reference of the production of the media culture in general and of the news in particular. They define it as the whole formats through which events are taken into consideration and given a meaning in order to follow organizational goals and be compatible with the demands of the public. In sum, the research of gains is characteristic of all the companies that operate in the market and the editorial firms are not alien to this logic.

That being said, if as stated by Altheide and Snow the production of the news tries to be compatible with the demands of the public, it follows that the construction of *constructed reality* may not be completely genuine. If we

think that editorial firms are just like any other firm that is guided by the market logic, it can be concluded that in order to sell and give to the public what they want to listen to, there might be some alterations of the *objective reality*. In fact, news can be represented from different points of view and choosing a specific frame of representation can influence the perception that the public has of an issue. Therefore, the selection of the frame is a very delicate matter. So, the big question here is if the media choose a frame because of their intellectual and political beliefs or to follow the natural tendencies of the public, i.e. the market logic. In sum, in the latter hypothesis, that is if they choose the easiest way to sell copies, the problem will always be the creation of a one-way biased reality. This being said, it is necessary to clarify that for the sake of our argument I am considering only independent and private media, which therefore do not need to follow political parties' guidelines, and I am presuming that media in European liberal democracies are free to express.

1.1 Migration Frames

'The major premise of framing theory is that an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations' (Chong and Druckman 2007, 104). Therefore, the *frame* of an issue is the schema of interpretation that the media or people give to issues 'through the articulation of an argument or a "reasoning" that makes it understandable according to a certain viewpoint' (Marini 2006, 70) and reorient their thinking about a particular issue. For example, a migrant that comes to Europe can be interpreted – framed – as someone that could steal the job to Europeans or as a young man/woman that could be a resource in a continent that is becoming always more populated by old people. These frames give birth to two different kinds of political issues, from one side control and limitation of migration and from the other one reception and job offer. For this reason, politicians attempt to mobilize voters behind their political decisions and policies by encouraging them to think about certain facts and policies in a particular manner. This is accomplished by highlighting certain features of an event or a policy. In so doing, the speaker is invoking a 'frame in communication'. A frame in communication 'organizes everyday reality' (Tuchman 1978, 193) by providing meaning to events (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987) and by fostering 'particular definitions and interpretations of political issues' (Shah et al. 2002, 343) and therefore construing reality.

To better understand the frame in communication, we should start by saying that, first of all, the frame of an issue directs our attention on certain events, causes and consequences. Secondly, as Ferree states it arranges a

series of arguments 'connecting them through an organising idea that suggests what is at stake in the issue' (quoted in Marini 2006, 70). Basically, it suggests us from which point of view to look at the issue. The news can have a negative or positive slant that expresses certain tendentiousness as regards the issue that it reports. This frame can be analysed through the distinction of four dimensions that constitute the construction of the news:

> 1. The importance that is given to the news on the issue through their length, number of images and repetition of the stories; 2. The criticism, that is the critical evaluation of the behavior and ideas of the principal actors of the events; 3. The definition of the linkages between the events and the actors in order to attribute the responsibility; 4. The choice of the perspective from which to interpret the events (Marini 2006, 70).

We can infer from these four dimensions that the mass media provide an arbitrary representation of reality, that could manipulate the public opinion. The first point, that in other words is the salience that is given to the issue, may influence the attention that the public will dedicate to the issue and therefore the importance that it will acquire in their representation of reality. For example, if they publish everyday news on the landing off Sicily and on the great amount of people that arrive, migration will become a top priority and other issues will be side-lined. The other three points concern the qualification of the issue: the way in which the problem is narrated, the facts that are underlined or minimized, the personal opinions of the journalists that may be expressed more or less implicitly, the choice of the words to use and the meaning that is attributed to them. All of this has consequences on the perception and evaluation that the public has of an issue (Cheli 1992, 108-110). We should remember that in the founding essay of the *agenda setting theory* McCombs and Shaw try to define the issue salience and they state that 'while the mass media may have little influence on the direction or intensity of the attitudes, it is hypothesized that the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes towards the political issues' (1972, 177). In other words, the media do not tell people 'what to think' but 'what to think about'. If we focus our attention only on the 'transfer of salience', we can definitely affirm that the media only tell people 'what to think about'. But, if we include in our analysis the concept of framing, it is inevitable to think that the media may guide individuals on 'how to think about'.

For these reasons, framing is at the centre of the recent immigration debate. The linguistic framing – frames for illegal immigrant, asylum seekers, border security, invasion, undocumented workers – is not neutral and gives an

evaluation; in other words, it defines the problem in a certain way, and it evokes different solutions. Hereunder the three most common frames used in the immigration debate will be presented.

1.1.1. The Illegal Frame

As Lakoff and Ferguson (2006) state, the *illegal frame* is one of the most commonly used frames. According to them the term 'illegal immigrants' is all but neutral. Being in agreement with this statement, I would like to clarify the partisanship of the term. Using the word *illegal* presumes a moral and juridical evaluation of all migrants which is quite clearly fallacious. As a matter of fact, it arises from a very weak line of reasoning given that the term *illegal* is associated with criminal acts, hence the *illegal frame* is prone to the conclusion that all immigrants are criminals. But this would mean take a part to represent the whole. In fact, even if a part of immigrants arrives illegally – and in any case it would be better to use a more neutral and juridically correct term like *undocumented migrants* – not all of them arrive through illegal ways or without the necessary documents to solicit the residence permit or an asylum request. 'By invoking the illegal frame, the severity of their offenses [that is crossing the border illegally or have an expired visa for overstaying] is inflated' (Lakoff and Ferguson 2006). Therefore, this association of terms produces an inappropriate universalization that causes a wrong representation of the situation and of immigrants. If immigrants are pictured as criminals the consequence is that they should be prosecuted solely for being immigrants but, in fact, when they arrive on the European soil, they are usually taken into consideration by national states authorities and present asylum claims. The problem of this frame is that it associates the immigrant with the illegal act of border crossing without recognising a legal or an illegal act of border crossing. In sum, putting these two terms together unfairly stigmatize individuals through a clearly fallacious reasoning with inadequate evaluative tendencies.

Moreover, the use of the term *immigrant* may also be associated with *otherness*. The concept of *otherness* defines a social differentiation separating *us* from *them*. When differentiation is based on ethnic, geographical, economical or another distinguishing characteristic, it is detrimental. 'When the *other* is being judged, the emphasis is on what differentiates instead of what connects. The encounter with the *other* is dominated by our preconceptions, which depend on public representations' (Creutz-Kämppi 2008, 297).

In the European immigration context, the public representation often relates the *us* with Europeans and the *them* with the others, i.e. the immigrants. This representation reveals certain hypocrisy within the European way of thinking. It is interesting to notice that the European states, which are still

sovereign states, in the discourse on migration tend to forget inner differences, considering all European individuals as one unit – the *us* – and always stress the image of the invasion of the immigrants – the *others*. But isn't this dichotomy against all the values of solidarity and cosmopolitanism that the European Union promotes? The problem is that 'the regional unions like the European Union are not genuinely cosmopolitan, rather they continue to be part of the variety of the political particularism, since they keep excluding those that, as in this case, are not Europeans' (Rosler 2015, 67). This tendency is reflected in all the provisions of the European Union on resettlement and return policies, including migration management agreements of both countries of origin and transit countries. After all, it is not clear why an Italian can move towards another European state without being pointed out as an invader or a public danger, but this logic does not work for those who are extra-Europeans. At the end of the game cosmopolitanism seems to be a relative condition.

1.1.2. The Security Frame

Strictly related to the *illegal frame*, there is the *security frame*. There is no doubt that today security is one of the main concerns of the European Union and that immigrants are often seen as a threat or possible cause of insecurity. The first response to the 'invasion' of 'illegal immigrants' is obviously 'border security'. But, as Lakoff and Ferguson state (2006) 'security implies that there is a threat, and a threatened, and that the threatened needs protection'. In recent years, irregular migration coming from Africa and the Middle East to Europe has been defined as a security problem associated with international crime and terrorism. Therefore, following this line of reasoning the threat is represented by migration from African and Middle East countries and the threatened is the European Union's identity and the physical integrity of its citizens. If this is the logic followed by this frame it is understandable that the asked solutions will be border security. In the Italian case, the border is represented by the Mediterranean and a significant part of media narrative is about a copious number of landings on the Italian coasts and on the 'clandestine' that are arriving, which are represented as a menace for our personal security. 'All these images [..] can be directly linked to the corresponding political discourses that insist on the conception of a besieged space, of flows to be stemmed and governed' (Bruno, 2016).

1.1.3. The Humanitarian Frame

The *humanitarian frame* may be seen as the other side of the coin of the *illegal* and *security frame*, as the positive one, but it is not less harmful for migrants. By definition, the act of helping someone implies that there is inequality between actors. Respecting this pattern, within this frame, media 'set up

a hierarchical relationship between a vulnerable subject and a privileged viewer, who is positioned as the distributor of rights and as a moral subject of sight[2]' (Musarò 2013, 39). As reminded by Musarò this humanitarian narrative has its roots first in the 'religious salvational narratives of rescue' and then 'in the literature and liberal sentimental education cultivating the noblesse oblige of the powerful (rights holders) towards the powerless (those who cannot exercise their human rights)'. Today we would say that it is 'quintessentially cosmopolitan', whether we see its origin in a cosmopolitan ethic imperative to recognize the needs of strangers or in a 'more personal response grounded in human sympathy', the imperative behind this logic is to 'reduce suffering' (Calhoun 2008, 2-3). In order to achieve such a result, media representation aims to generate compassion. In other words, the media machinery, as Wilson and Brown state, deals with 'the mobilization of empathy' (quoted in Musarò 2013, 39). This reminds us of a passage of 'A Treatise of Human Nature' by David Hume (1960, 386) which states that

> When the present misery of another has any strong influence upon me, the vivacity of the conception is not confin'd merely to its immediate object, but diffuses its influence over all the related ideas, and gives me a lively notion of all the circumstances of that person, [...]. By means of this lively notion I am interested in them; take part with them; and feel a *sympathetic* motion in my breast, conformable to whatever I imagine in his. If I diminish the vivacity of the first conception, I diminish that of the related ideas; [...] By this diminution I destroy the future prospect, which is necessary to interest me perfectly in the fortune of another.

Hence, as it can be inferred from this quote, the representation of the migrants as vulnerable and suffering aims to awaken empathy in the general public and policy makers. An impressive image of migration would be more likely to awake in *us* that empathy that will lead to solidarity – at an individual level – and to economic or political intervention – at a political level. Moral sentiments 'have become an essential force in contemporary politics: they nourish its discourses and legitimize its practices, particularly where the discourses and practices are focused on the disadvantaged and the dominated, whether at home (the immigrants) or farther away (the victims of war or natural disaster)' (Musarò 2013, 40). I would add that this frame creates the perfect environment to exercise our *cosmopolitan duty*, to empathize with the *other* and mitigate its suffering. Unfortunately, despite

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[2] We should remind that Musarò, in his analysis, examines the representations of distant human suffering as it is constructed in public communication within two institutional contexts of humanitarian aid agencies and border control agencies. Anyway, I found that some of his definitions perfectly fit in our more general discourse on the humanitarian frame of the media.

the good intentions it falls back into a paradox, because it seems to be just another shade of the dichotomy *us – them.* Establishing a hierarchical moral relationship, the risk is to foster a form of *selfish altruism* in which the privileged part will gain esteem and social status through its good actions. In sum, the relationship pictured by this frame is always in equilibrium between inequality and solidarity and stigmatises the differences between the *compassionate* Europeans and the *voiceless* and *helpless* migrants. If it is like this it follows that cosmopolitanism, again, is necessarily relative and only an ideal state of mind.

2. The Impact of Media on Public Attitudes on Immigration

To understand the impact of media on public attitudes on immigration it is useful to recall the concept of *agenda*. There are two types of agenda: The public agenda consists of all the issues that are commonly perceived by members of the community as deserving public attention. The institutional agenda is the list of items that decision-makers explicitly take into consideration. The existence of these two levels of agenda implies a competition first for the allocation of attention on a certain issue and then for the allocation of resources necessary to solve the problem. Consequently, the starting point of the creation of the issues and of the two agendas is the fluid circulation of political ideas concerning social problems in that vast sea that is the society. These ideas can circulate among pre-existing communities that have a specific task in the public intervention (e.g. public transport, health, environment, education, etc.) or among organizations or movements that set up in order to include the issue they are concerned about in the institutional agenda. To understand and explain the latter hypothesis it seems useful here to recall the concept of negative association, which refers to:

> The formation of political groups[3] (in-groups) that is based on identification with others who are similarly situated in relation to an external entity, such as another individual or group (out-group). While political groups may form for a variety of positive reasons, [...], an essential part of what brings their members together is their common difference from an outside entity, as in the case of a common enemy (Evrigenis 2008, 1).

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[3] I assume here a wide definition of political group as whatever group of individuals that gathers to discuss an issue of social relevance and form with reference to an antagonistic relationship with other entities.

If we presume that migration is always presented by the media within a securitarian frame, it is likely that the majority of the population will see it as a menace for the stability of the country and will require politicians certain kind of politics such as the ones of borders control and rejection to the countries of origin. This influence that the media have on citizens' frames and attitudes is typically called a framing effect. Let's suppose now that a group of people starts to see these politics and the majority opinion as an enemy that threaten their believes and their system of values. They will probably gather into a group – in-group – to promote their cause in juxtaposition to the one of the out-group. In sum, this may be a way to explain the formation of NGOs or other civil societies' organizations. We could hazard that the push factor for the creation of so many NGOs is not only the promotion of the values in which they believe, but also the necessity to side against the external enemy.

Going back to what we were saying before this digression on negative association, it is important to restate that ideas become social concerns thanks to groups of people – citizen's associations, interest groups, sectors of the institutions – that invest their time to advocate these ideas that have formed in the society. As an alternative, issues can acquire relevance through external events that cause a shock in the society (e.g. wars, crisis, terrorism, natural disasters).

The groups that promote an issue have as interlocutors and possible allies four kinds of actors that can participate in the fight to affirm the issue:

> 1. The attentive public that always keeps informed on emerging political issues; 2. The attention groups, that are composed of people that normally are not interested in politics but due to their cultural background and values are inclined to support the cause; 3. Public figures like members of the parliament, managers, consultants of politicians. These people could actively engage in the cause; 4. The general public. Although it is a passive public it should not be underestimated because it can play an important role in the competition game (Marini 2006, 91-92).

Basically, the key to an understanding of the relation between these actors is the influence exercised both by the actors that can actively exert it and by the ones that are object of it and can express their opinion through the public discourse. This is why a fundamental task of the issue promoter is the circulation of their discourse and why there is an important relation with the media. In this relation with the media it is of extreme importance, for the issue promoters, to specify the frame of the issue. The desired frame is essential to make circulate a certain kind of discourse and reach the targeted public (e.g. if a group of people aims to construct a wall on the border, in order to

stop the arrival of migrants, it would like migration to be represented within the securitarian frame and not within a more positive frame that encourages reception policies).

Following this line of reasoning the affirmation of the issues occurs through the competitive interaction among groups, which commit themselves into a series of strategic actions that aim to increase the consensus on certain interpretation of an issue. This is why we are talking about an approach that assumes the point of view of the constructed reality. Besides the interaction between the groups there is also the interaction between the arenas: 'the arenas are subsets of the public sphere, that is the social environments of the public discussion (for example the parliament, the media, parties' congresses) and are seen inside a system of interconnections, through which the issues develop and are reformulated' (Marini 2006, 105). Needless to say, that the arena of our interest is the one of the media.

The media, due to their capacity to define political reality, have the power to influence the political debate. In other words, through the media coverage of certain political events and investigative reports of issues that they retain important, they are able to direct the political debate. Cobb and Elder[4] identify three fundamental functions of intermediation and linkage related to the input, process and output of the media:

> 1. The media are gatekeepers: they direct the attention towards certain aspects of the reality and shape the information on which the political process is based. Therefore, they can be considered as agenda setters; 2. The media provide policymakers with inter-institutional communication channels; 3. The media provide the public with information and interpretations of the political process (quoted in Marini 2006, 114).

In conclusion, the media appear as intermediaries that through their function shape the meaning of the information. In this process it is inevitable that, they alter, wittingly or unwittingly, the content of the information and therefore influence the decisions of political institutions. In other words, they create biases. Biases are distortions that originate from the selection and the different shades of meaning that journalists give to news[5]. In fact, the media

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[4] To consult the original work, see Cobb R. W., Elder C.D. 1981.

[5] Scholars have tried to state if in most of the cases the distortion created by journalists is witting or unwitting, but the answer depends on the context in which the information is created. Scholars that have studied the American and British context affirm that the 'structural distortion' prevails on the 'political distortion'. This means that it is likely that the distortion be created by rules of the journalistic environment (quality of the news or in some cases the desperate research for audience and sales through the sensationalization of the news) rather than by the political convictions of the journalist (Mazzoleni, 1998, 83).

tend to turn, all of a sudden, their attention on a problem and to address it in a positive or negative connotation. By doing so they exercise their function as gatekeepers. We should not forget that this function is shared with the issue promoters that aim to put their concerns under the attention of the media and to make the journalists assume their point of view.

A further reading can be given using some aspects of the theory of the spiral of silence developed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974). If the media have the capacity to define and make circulate an opinion as the one of the majorities, regardless if it is actually like that, it stands to reason that the predominant frame will lead those who have a different opinion to be in a weaker position. Noelle-Neumann states that the media provide the environmental pressure to which people respond with approval or with silence. So, if the media represent migration within a securitarian frame, people will respond or with the adoption of that point of view or with silence. Having said this, I do not believe that those who want to represent migration within another frame are silenced. Rather, since extended media coverage of an issue within a certain point of view gives to the representatives of that opinion an advantage when defending it, I think that minority opinion will have less bargaining power at a political level. So, if for instance reception policies are always represented with caution, it is likely that those who promote them will be less listened by policymakers.

In sum, what seems relevant for our final aim is 'the observation that the media do not limit their selves to represent the tendencies of the public opinion, but they also give them concrete shape and development' (Wolf 1992, 75). Therefore, a change in the tendencies of the public opinion is strictly connected to the media. However, one should not from one side overestimate the power of the media and think that they are the only change-engine and from the other side underestimate the decision capacity of individuals. Moreover, a minority group could gain the media's affection and acquire salience instead of becoming silent.

3. Media Coverage of the Migration Crisis on the Italian Media

In this final part I would like to offer some evidence of the interconnection between the media, the political system and the public opinion. In our ideal triangle these three actors are interdependent, but the mass media have a privileged role. According to the perspective of the *mediatisation of politics* the media are the arena in which the exchanges and the relations between the three actors take place. In this model the media are the channels through

which the political system and the citizens communicate, the stage on which political actions is carried on, and at the same time they are interlocutors of both actors. It follows that they have a strong role in influencing the nature of the relation between the political system and the citizens, the agenda of the political issues and the elaboration of the political response (Mazzoleni 1998, 26-27).

Even if it is true that there is an attempt to give a European response to the so-called migration crisis, it cannot be denied that this response is the result of the sum of the different positions of Member States. In fact, since the emergence of the 'European migration crisis', the highest political instances of the Commission (President and First Vice-President's offices) took over most of the themes under the responsibility of the Commissioner for 'Home Affairs and Migration', and that of 'Security'. The High Representative has been also equally important in the management of migration issues, particularly regarding third country cooperation, defence and external financial assistance. The fact that migration and security policies have been handled in a 'crisis-mode' has prevented the European Commission 'from playing its role as envisaged in the Treaties, side-lining the European Parliament' (Carrera 2019, 72). The Juncker Commission (2014-2019), actually, has often paid too much attention to some member state governments and to the European Council. 'The "policy salience" of the migration dossier between 2015 and 2018 translated into the multiplication of European Council meetings dealing with "migration", with Justice and Home Affairs Council bodies – i.e. Ministries of Interior of EU Member States – playing a rather influential role in setting political priorities and policies in response to the refugee crisis' (Carrera 2019, 73). In sum, for better or for worse, national states are still the protagonists of the game and the same applies to national media. Therefore, I have decided to focus on one particular state in our analysis. The reader may now object that by doing so we will have a partial vision. This is certainly true, but still, it seems to me that this picture might be emblematic of the role that media and politics have in the European migration crisis. The state has been chosen on the basis that it has been one of the principle ways of access for refugees and migrants trying to enter the EU and has played a key role in the search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean.

The aim is to explore the different frames through which the crisis has been presented in two important Italian newspapers. I selected the two most popular Italian broadsheets: *La Repubblica* and *Il Corriere della Sera. La Repubblica* was founded in 1976, it is currently owned by Gruppo Editoriale L'Espresso and is published in Rome. Its editorial line is broadly centre left. According to the last data certified by Accertamenti Diffusione Stampa in 2017 its daily circulation average was 292.365. *Il Corriere della Sera* was

founded in Milan in 1876 and is currently owned by the media conglomerates RCS Media Group. It is traditionally considered a centrist newspaper aligned with the establishment. Its daily circulation average in 2017 was 322.826 copies. For the analysis I used only the paper edition, since to understand the salience that is given to an issue it is important to observe also the newspaper's layout. I analysed a week's coverage of an event that has been crucial in the European migration policy and I took into consideration: the salience given to the issue, the labels used to describe refugees and migrants, the narrative frame into which the news can be placed, explanation for the factors driving population flows, solutions to the refugee and migrant crisis, the reference to the European Union. The selected articles have been divided first, according to the genre and, secondly, according to the characteristics aforesaid. After this phase, I highlighted the most frequent words used in each article to find some mutual features and then I qualitatively analysed the content of the articles.

3.1 Case Study: Boat Disaster on the Night of 18th April 2015

The event I chose is the boat disaster that happened on the night of 18th April 2015 about 96 km off the Libyan coast and 193 km south of the Italian island of Lampedusa. In the shipwreck 800 migrants died and UNHCR's spokesperson Adrian Edwards described it as 'the deadliest incident in the Mediterranean that we have ever recorded' (UNHCR, 2015). The week following the tragedy saw substantial coverage of the crisis in both newspapers. The key words used to find the news related to the event were: 'naufragio', 'Mare Nostrum', 'Triton', 'migranti', 'tragedia', 'scafisti'.

Sampled articles 19th -26th April 2015

	La Repubblica	Il Corriere della Sera
Front pages dedicated to the issue	7	6
Articles	57	71
Opinions/Editorials	6	6
Total articles	63	77

The event was chosen also because it is emblematic of the Italian representation of migration which began in the 90s with the seaborne arrivals of Albanians on the Apulian coasts. Since then, landings have become a symbolic image of migration.

The shipwreck dominated the news for the whole week. As we can see in the data of table 1, basically every day the front page contained news on the

event. Both newspapers not only reported the event but also analysed the migration crisis from different angles, such as: the important contribution of Italy in rescue operations, the provision of care and reception to the survivors, homicide investigation of the possible responsible, the position of the Italian government on the management of the crisis and the approach of the European Union towards the issue. In general, the discourse's tone was empathetic and compassionate, stressing the humanitarian dimension of the accident. On the other hand, all anti-immigrant sentiments were expressed through the opinion of the right and far-right political leaders – such as the Lega Nord and Forza Italia – that pictured the arrivals as a security problem.

La Repubblica focused on a wide range of issues, including: reports of the shipwreck, declarations of the survivors, proposals of Italian and European politicians to tackle the emergency, mandate of the search and rescue operations, investigations over responsibility for the incident, problems related to reception capabilities. It dedicated great space to the issue with the special 'The massacre of migrants' that occupied about ten pages every day from the 20th to the 24th of April. The use of expressions such as 'apocalypse', 'epochal exodus', 'invasion', 'tragedy' is very frequent, the tone in general is alarmist and the element of drama from a lexical and iconographic point of view is constant.

We can observe how a single landing becomes a media event of extraordinary attention due to its character. In fact, in the case of events like the boat disaster of 18th April 2015 media coverage behaves differently than normal and offers the topic of arrivals an exceptional level of attention. The consequence is that these disasters at sea 'also constitute the trigger event for media and collective representation of the problem; they become pivotal moments in describing the situation and tell the story while causing a visible change in their management at the level of policy' (Binotti, Bruno 2018a, 146). Paying attention to some of the headlines that appeared during those days on Italian media we can notice how the symbolic dimension of an event intersects directly with the political and institutional action. Actually, the most topics debated were the provision of aid for the survivors and search and rescue operations. Indeed, on this subject, the discussion about operation Triton and its weaknesses assumed great importance during the week. If before the shipwreck most politicians were singing the praises of operation Triton, after the event political discourse and media representation changed. For example, a headline of 20th April 2015 quotes:

> 'A stretch of sea without controls and the delays in the interventions, the announced disaster of Triton'.

The central role of this event is evidenced by measures and declarations adopted by the European Union during the following days. On 21st April the UE adopted a ten-points action plan to tackle the emergency (European Commission Press Release 20/4/2015). The plan included the strengthening of operation Triton and of the operations against smugglers. Moreover, the EU declared itself ready to 'consider the options for an emergency relocation mechanism'. Ten days later the sad event, the European Parliament adopted also the *Resolution of 29 April 2015 on the latest tragedies in the Mediterranean and EU migration and asylum policies – 2015/2660(RSP),* in which it called the EU to 'provide the necessary resources to ensure that search and rescue obligation are effectively fulfilled' and recalled Member States to 'make greater contributions to existing resettlement programmes'. Few weeks later – on 13th May 2015 – the Commission published the European Agenda on Migration in which it dealt with both emergency and medium and long-term measures. In line with what was proposed by the two institutions the Council on 18th May 2015 agreed on the establishment of an EU military operation – UNAVFOR Med – with the mission to identify, capture and dispose of vessels and enabling assets used or suspected of being used by migrant smugglers or traffickers. In the words and provisions of the European Union there was great emphasis on the need to stop the criminal groups that send the migrants to die. Matteo Renzi, Italian prime minister at the time stated that 'we have to declare war to the smugglers' and that the time of the 'solo humanitarian operations is over' (La Repubblica, 20 April 2015). Smugglers started to be defined as 'slavers' and there was talking about the 'first war of the European Union, the war against the slavers of the 21st century' (La Repubblica, 22 April 2015).

Il *Corriere della Sera* also gave space to compassionate accounts of the disaster in its special 'The massacre of migrants', that occupied between ten and fifteen pages every day from the 20th to the 24th of April. In general, *Il Corriere* was even more negative towards the European Union and dedicated more space to criminal investigations and the issue of international people trafficking. In fact, what leaps out is the emphasis on the theme of smuggling, with news ranging from the Italian and European's institution response to the issue to criminal investigations by Italian authorities. This attention on smugglers help to identify a public enemy to fight. Some headlines are:

- Fight to smugglers: act like against terrorism (*Il Corriere*, 20 April 2015)
- Alfano: sinking the boats before they leave (*Il Corriere*, 22 April 2015)
- How to punish the new slaveholders (*Il Corriere*, 22 April 2015)
- Trafficking – People smugglers supported by Libya: 'Soldiers are giving us the boats' (*Il Corriere*, 24 April 2015)

In this way 'the external boundary, represented by the arrival by boat, identifies the "human trafficker" as responsible, while the inner boundary identifies him as a criminal to identify and subdue. In these terms, the narrative of the disaster can become that of a moral panic, with the urgent need to "do something" and a villain to oppose' (Binotto, Bruno, 2018a).

The other themes that were very present, like in *La Repubblica*, were the discussion about the search and rescue operations and humanitarian narratives which expressed compassion and empathy for the victims of the boat disaster. Other topics addressed were responses proposed by the Italian government, the positions of European Union representatives and discussion about tackling the refugee crisis by stabilizing the situation in the countries of origin.

Focusing more on the type of frame that was used, both newspapers adopted a humanitarian frame which is typical of news related to shipwrecks. The linguistic references are related to the terms 'mass grave', 'the duty to act to rescue refugees', 'tragedy', 'desperate' and the visual ones prefer to show children and women. In general, when using this frame, the description of dramatic events is accompanied by severe critics to the EU's response to the phenomenon. For example, Mauro Magatti states 'During these years European, national and local leaders, treated the issue in the way they are used to do with whatever other problem: important issue if and only if it has effects on the (immediate) consensus'. So, he points out the lack of long-term vision of the political class, independently of the political colour. 'The rights riding shamelessly the fear and the annoyance of those who feel threatened by what is happening. And the left contenting itself with generous declarations on reception and solidarity, except then in the facts running after the rights to not lose votes' (*Il Corriere*, 21 April 2015).

Conclusions

As we have seen throughout this paper, the migration issue is a very complex matter that needs an accurate analysis to be understood in its entirety and I only aspire to give a little contribution in the vast sea of studies on this subject. I think that going into this topic is of great importance nowadays, since we may dare to say that the European response to the migrant's flows is the continent's challenge of the early 21st century.

The main conclusion I can reach is that political decisions and the media go hand in hand and for this reason I argued that analysing how the media picture the migration phenomenon is essential to understand the logic behind the European response to migration.

The case study analysed has been useful to confirm my theoretical assumptions. As regards the processing of the two newspapers analysed, they reported the event mainly in similar ways. The similarity in the news agendas and frames used may be explained through the fact that they are both quality newspapers whose political orientations are similar. Both newspapers presented news that can be framed mainly in the humanitarian frame. However, we could say that political institutions adopted a securitarian stance, responding to the event with the establishment of the military operation EUNAVFOR Med and stressing the necessity to stop the flow of refugees at origins. Political stances focused more on the protection of the European external and internal borders, rather than on the safety and respect of the rights of the migrants. Also, the amount of measures and declaration adopted by the European Union during the weeks following the event chosen as case study, highlights the fact that media coverage does transform a topic that may be marginal into a relevant one for the political agenda of institution.

The external border of the European Union is the place where ideally the two narratives meet. The border can be the place where hundreds of migrants die and thus cause our empathy or the place where other hundreds of migrants cross illegally the border and hence threaten our security. What the two frames have in common is the representation of migration as an emergency. The latter is emphasized also through the tendency to give more space to news that can emotionally involve the reader.

Be it humanitarian or securitarian, what the media construct is an emergency imaginary that distract attention from the reality of the facts, that is a structural problem that persists from some years and will not stop soon. This emergency imaginary leads the public opinion to demand certain political response that in most of the cases seem in conflict with the values that the European Union preaches. It seems that we are swinging between the will the save people's life and the will to protect *Fortress Europe*. What is certain until now is that this 'migration crisis' is the political and identitarian challenge of the nowadays European Union.

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