

Information on refugees in the European Parliament's Virtual Press Room: A critical analysis

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ABSTRACT

This research offers a critical perspective on the news coverage by the European Parliament's Virtual Press Room (VPR) of the refugee issue during the European migrant crisis, from 2015 to 2017. Recent social media research has focused on systematising a theoretical approach to Virtual Press Rooms (VPRs), but there is a remarkable lack of critical approaches that link news production to the institutional ideologies operating in the news industry. A content

analysis is conducted on the characteristics and tone of news articles published by the VPR, followed by a comparison with the European Union's regulatory framework and actual response to the issue. The research reveals a positive treatment in news coverage of the refugee issue, which suggests an imbalance between the EU's institutional news policy on refugees and the weak and fractured response of European organizations when taking action on the issue.

KEY WORDS: Virtual Press Room, European Parliament, news, refugees.

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The technosphere created out of the digitisation of the world has not only affected and reshaped the hegemonic policies and models for domination (Castells 2010; McChesney 2014), but has also given rise to new practices of politicisation of information related to various social issues, such as immigration. Although digital networks and online news services in general have been reinvented to support institutions in these practices, we will focus our attention on one phenomenon in particular: the Virtual Press Room (hereinafter, VPR), a hypermedia tool that is the descendant of the traditional Press Office, but now in cyberspace.

This phenomenon is very new and therefore lacks a body of epistemological theoretical research that would support a scientific approach to it. An initial review of the literature reveals the predominance of an instrumental, corporate and financial view in studies of VPRs. The early years of this century saw the publication of the first studies, which highlight the implementation of these tools on the websites of various organisations. Almansa (2005), Castillo Esparcia (2006), Castillo and Almansa (2005), García-Orosa (2013), Moya Hiniesta (2013), Marca Francés, Matilla and Mateos Rusillo (2014) and Durántez-Stolle (2017) fix their attention on the connection of public relations and information management with the press through Communications Offices and corporate areas. Others, like Ruiz, Salar and Nobell (2010), Cantalapiedra, Iturregui and González (2012), Cantalapiedra, Iturregui and Alzaga (2017), Herrero-Gutiérrez et al. (2017) and Martínez Ferro (2017), focus on hypermedia mechanisms to create a transparent state of opinion with an emphasis on civic action. In Latin America, studies focus on an epistemological theoretical analysis of the concept, and the prevailing use of VPRs as news archives (Canelón-Silva 2011; Gabino and Méndez 2011). It is important to clarify that although our study has drawn chiefly on sources by Spanish and Latin American authors, we have also reviewed some interesting studies

in English dealing mainly with the private sector and, more specifically, the corporate world (Reber and Kim 2006; Pettigrew and Reber 2010; Lee and Lin 2017).

Academic interest in this area has centred mainly around the conflict of criteria related to the name, structure and functions of VPRs, as well as their inadequate use as repositories of content lacking in real resources to manage information flows to the public (Castillo Esparcia 2006; Wilcox, Cameron and Xifra 2012). There is also a notable number of quantitative studies focusing on the private sector, where financial and technological conditions have facilitated a greater development of the phenomenon. While both Castillo Esparcia (2006) and Xifra (2011) offer clear definitions of most of the functions and guarantees of VPRs, their work shows signs of a reductionist view that prioritises their documentary role as information subsidies. Herrero-Gutiérrez et al. (2017) take a less instrumentalist view of VPR operations from the perspective of the transparency of the public and administrative policies of democratic governments. These authors point to the weakening credibility of government institutions in relation to informational freedom and describe Virtual Press Rooms as alternatives for the management of transparent information.

Based on this review of the literature, it would seem that at the theoretical level there are potential aspects of VPRs that have not been explored in depth in the studies consulted. First of all, there is clear evidence that corporations have the potential to undermine the principles that limit the monopoly of information held by mass media conglomerates. Institutions need to be able to construct their own communication systems and models with their audiences, as their Virtual Press Rooms can become channels for information and content flows with their own criteria for determining newsworthiness.

To explore this question of the news values of Virtual Press Rooms, this study looks at how they have dealt with one specific issue: the refugee question in the European Union. To this end, it is necessary to refer to studies that connect communication, the media and immigration as a context for our analysis. Research analysing news on immigrants and refugees includes studies focusing on the stereotyping of these groups from the perspective of framing theory applied to news production (Igartua et al. 2014; Igartua et. al. 2007; Igartua, Muñiz and Cheng 2005), which provide an academic foundation for our analysis. Also of relevance to this study are contributions that have used the concept of graphic coding to highlight aspects related to human drama and solidarity (López del Ramo and Humanes 2016). Carniel, Ortega and Velázquez (2018) argue that

regardless of how news related to Mediterranean migrations is framed, all such stories share common features that contribute to the normalisation of dominant discourses on the issue. The international literature also includes authors who have studied criminalisation, negative images and controversial aspects in the media that influence public opinion on immigration (Leudar et al. 2008; Pruitt 2019). Similarly, Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017) highlight a consistently ambivalent portrayal of refugees and asylum seekers that frames them as victims, which also contributes to a pejorative or negative depiction of immigrants, also with associations of illegality, terrorism and crime.

However, of special interest among all these studies is Chouliaraki and Stolic's critical analysis of news imagery in five European countries (Greece, Hungary, Italy, Ireland and the United Kingdom) related to the refugee situation from June to December 2015. The stance of these authors is in line with the view taken in our study, with their assertion of the social responsibility associated with informational mediation, which is also applicable to the case of the EU Virtual Press Rooms. As the authors suggest, 'while, inevitably, the space of appearance (of news imagery) is traversed by systemic relationships of power, sovereign and biopolitical, it is important that we turn these relationships into a site of struggle, where the norms of humanity, agency, and responsibility are constantly at stake' (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017: 1174).

Our study examines the VPR with a critical view of how information on immigration and refugees in the European Union is framed in its news coverage. In terms of its structure and composition, the European Parliament's Virtual Press Room is one of the best organised EU agencies, with highly centralised content and a wide variety of news information. On its home page, the VPR presents all the press releases, memoranda, announcements and interviews, as well as other news-related documents. It also includes an option for downloading news dossiers of the most recent press conferences, along with a platform for journalists and media teams to apply for accreditation, as well as access to the Multimedia Centre to download archive photographs, a video library and other institutional materials. As this brief analysis of its structure reveals, the VPR offers the functions of a repository for news content and a regulator of business-media/journalist-citizen information flows. The approach taken in this study has a descriptive component, involving the identification, measurement and classification of variables related to the refugee crisis, which will be analysed in the corpus of news stories by means of a content analysis. This is combined with an interpretative component, whereby the data collected is associated with the political and

legislative position of the European Union and its subsequent action in practice. Our intention with this combination of approaches is to draw inferences from the content in order to demonstrate a correspondence between the framing of information by the VPR and the legislative framework and public discourse of the EU in relation to refugee flows.

HYPOTHESIS AND METHODOLOGY

This study is conceived as a response to the need for a critical approach that can help us to identify the institutional logic at work in the news production of the European Parliament's VPR. This means relating the explicit content produced by the VPR with the corporate mechanisms of information production that frame news in keeping with the organisation's interests. This article thus presents a content analysis of the news outlets on the refugee issue with a descriptive and explanatory approach which, through the use of categories and subcategories, compares the treatment of this issue by the European Parliament's VPR with the regulatory approach of the European Parliament to the question.

The research is based on the premise of the obvious corporate function of the European Parliament's VPR, which, in its informational content and production, legitimizes the European Union's institutional discourse on refugees. However, the focus of this study with its critical perspective has led us to posit the following hypothesis:

H1. The European Parliament's VPR develops a positive discourse consistent with its refugee policy, which nevertheless contradicts the action taken by the European Union on this issue.

The confirmation or refutation of this hypothesis will serve to corroborate the scientific inference and evidence from the existing literature on VPRs as mere repositories of media content and as part of the ambiguous discourse of the European Union. As with other issues, such as the concept of pluralism, whether due to internal divergences (Valcke 2012) or to structural interests (Quirós 1998; Labio-Bernal 2014), neither the Parliament nor the Commission are capable of implementing a common immigration and asylum policy. The information generated by these bodies thus ends up becoming yet another example of a rhetoric on human rights within the European Union that is not reflected in the actions actually taken in response to refugees (Pérez González 2016: 472).

As a basic method, a content analysis will be used with both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. Since the object of study is the VPR taken as a whole, and given the wide variety of its content, the following criteria have been applied for the delimitation of our corpus:

- Topic: out of all the news stories published by the VPR, only those related to refugee issues are considered. For the purposeful selection, the content is segmented based on the presence of the key words ‘immigration’ and ‘refugees’ in the titles or headlines of publications.
- News genre: out of all the different types of information published by the Press Office, the study universe will be limited to news stories, press releases and communiques on the subject of refugees. This type of content has been selected because the existing literature on VPRs (Cantalapiedra, Iturregui Mardaras and González 2012; Castillo Esparcia 2006; García-Orosa 2013; Ruiz, Salar and Nobell 2010) has found them to be the most common or standardized.
- Timeframe: news stories, communiques and press releases published between September 2015 and November 2017 will be included. This timeframe has been chosen because immigration and refugee policy underwent some drastic upheavals after the news of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian child who was found dead on a Turkish beach in 2015. The impact on public opinion caused by media coverage of this event effectively mobilised the EU to change its legislative approach and reaction to the refugee crisis (Adler-Nissen, Andersen and Hansen 2020; Parker Naper and Goodman 2018; Hellmueller and Zhang 2019). The end date chosen for the timeframe is based on an institutional event, as November 2017 marked the end of the first two-year period established by the EU for the completion of the refugee resettlement plan under international protection agreements. Moreover, on 16 November the EU Parliament gave the green light to the final reform of the Dublin Regulation and approved the Common European Asylum System, two documents that were intended to regulate EU actions on the refugee issue for the years that followed, with laws and parameters quite different from those that defined the context of this study.

The application of the filters explained above to the study universe resulted in a total of 91 news articles published between September 2015 and December 2017, which constitutes the entire corpus. Since the study corpus is sufficiently representative and manageable for the research, it is

taken in its entirety for the purposes of the study. Given that content on the VPR is published at random intervals in response to events at any given moment, our selection begins on 5 September 2015, around the time that the pictures of Alan Kurdi first appeared in the international press, and ends in November 2017, as explained above. A total of 27 publications were found from 2017, 48 from 2016, and sixteen from 2015 beginning on 5 September of that year, as mentioned above.

For the content analysis, a coding system is needed that can single out textual units in the original text that are semantically relevant to the object of research. Study categories are used to determine whether the news is framed with a positive, negative or neutral tone (Bardin 1986), and therefore whether the news information is in keeping with EU policy or not.

For the definition of the categories and subcategories used in this study, we considered the principles and presuppositions related to immigration and asylum contained in the explicit declarations of the 1951 *Convention and Protocol related to the Status of Refugees*, the *European Agenda on Migration* (2015), and the *Dublin III Regulation* (2013). These agreements set out a series of specific standards for action in relation to asylum, reception, distribution and rights of refugees that served as the basis for the development of our analytical framework.

Bearing in mind that the issue of refugees has been characterised as a problem issue in the European Union, especially during the peak of the Mediterranean crisis (which was in turn conditioned by the situations of war and armed conflicts unfolding in the source countries of most of the migrants), the following set of categories was established based on an analysis of the aforementioned regulatory documents:

1. Asylum. This category refers to the main set of obligatory actions stipulated by the agreements for the treatment of migrants arriving in the national territory of EU member states. Included within this category are the following subcategories: Schengen Area, external borders, open borders, entry of immigrants, hosting, points of access, return policy, deportations, expulsion, minors, relocation and transfer, national governments, legal status and women.
2. Refugee rights. This category covers the principles of protection and human rights applicable to refugees once they are in an EU member state. This includes the following subcategories: freedom of movement, residence, international protection, identity

documents, healthcare, housing, employment, social integration, education, social assistance and access to courts.

3. Crisis. This category refers to the problematic connotations associated with the issue of immigration in the European Union and its direct connection with wars in countries in Africa and the Middle East, as well as the wave of displacements provoked by those conflicts. The main subcategories of this category are: terrorism, war, irregular immigration, distribution of refugees, border crossing, social issues, rejection, rescue operations, search and rescue, deaths at sea, refugee camps, European Union, EU countries (United Kingdom, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Greece, Malta, Hungary, Czech Republic), and other countries (Turkey).

After an initial probative analysis, we needed to account for implicit expressions of categories beyond the explicit references to them in the texts of the corpus. In many cases this means using other linguistic strategies and synonymy to refer to the same categories shown in this table.

To confirm the scientific reliability of the categories for analysis, we conducted an inter-rater reliability study in order to determine the level of agreement between the coders participating in the study (a total of two). Cohen's *kappa* coefficient was used as a formula, as it is recommended for studies that involve systems with multiple categories, as was the case for this study.

$$Pi \text{ or } kappa \text{ coefficient} = PAo - PAe / 1 - PAe$$

where *PAo* is the proportion of agreement observed and *PAe* is the proportion of agreement expected assuming independence between observers.

In our research, where both coder 1 and coder 2 analysed the same number of publications, the result of the coding is as follows:

$$k = \frac{0.9524 - 0.8389}{1 - 0.8389}$$
$$k = 0.7045$$

According to the rating model proposed by Landis and Koch (1977), anything between 0.61 and 0.80 is considered a substantial degree of agreement, equivalent to a score of 5/6. If our *kappa* coefficient is 0.7045, this means that the coding of the system of categories is substantial and that therefore the study is reliable.

The results of the content analysis were also compared with the European Union's regulatory framework and policy on refugees, immigration and asylum. To confirm our initial assumptions about the ineffectiveness of the EU during the crisis, we have taken into account a frame of reference on asylum regulations which, under the *Treaty of Lisbon* (2009), promote the harmonisation of standards for border control and community management of asylum policy. We also considered the precepts of the *Dublin III Regulation* (2013), which establish the legal procedures for asylum processing and international refugee law. In the long term, these frameworks should have led to an integrated approach to migration based on the principle of solidarity of States. Another framework considered is the *European Agenda on Migration*, approved in May 2015, which called for an increased search and rescue capacity in the Mediterranean, the containment of the massive, uncontrolled flow of migrants, and the opening up of safe, legal avenues for migrant entry into the countries of the European Economic Area, among other initiatives.

RESULTS

Below we discuss the more general results of the content analysis, first in quantitative terms and then based on a qualitative interpretation, in view of the critical and explanatory perspective of this study. We will attempt to correlate these results with the legislative and political principles contained in the reports and regulations of the European Union, which were studied as primary sources.

First of all, it was found that for all the news articles analysed, a positive tone predominated, with 213 positive mentions representing 44 per cent of the total of 480 addressing the issue studied in its three main categories. This supports our initial assumptions, which suggested a favourable position in relation to the information and the management of its most urgent consequences by the European Parliament, even when statistics and research produced later demonstrated flagrant breaches of the regulatory agreements established. For example, the European Parliament report titled *Evolution of the Number of Asylum Seekers in the EU* (2016) uses infographics to show that the EU countries that agreed to the *European Agenda on Migration* in 2015 have failed to fulfil the pledge to receive and resettle 20,000 refugees per year. Moreover, in its report *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016* (2017), the UNHCR published statistics exposing the violation of

refugees' rights to reception at national borders, as well as accommodation at refugee camps, the weak operational response to the crisis and breaches of the regulatory framework.

It was also observed that the 'asylum' category was the most mentioned of the three categories, with a count of 96 positive mentions, or 49 per cent of its total. Meanwhile, it was found that 'refugee rights', with a predominantly positive tone (56 per cent), was the least represented category in the news items. In the 'crisis' category, we found that the general prevailing tone was negative, with 66 mentions or 35 per cent of its total. All these data are shown in the following graph.

Figure 1: Graph showing percentages of mentions by category according to tone of news article.

These percentages demonstrate the importance given by the EU to maintaining a positive discourse in relation to asylum and refugee rights, although as will be shown below, many of the subcategories of 'rights' received very few mentions, and, in the case of the 'crisis' category, there are topics with a clearly negative semantic connotation, such as 'irregular entry', 'terrorism', and 'expulsions', among others. The following graph shows the overall calculation of the frequency of mentions of each of the subcategories in the study.

Figure 2: Compilation of mentions of all subcategories in the study.

ASYLUM: POSITIVE MESSAGING ON DISTRIBUTION AND NEUTRAL FRAMING OF WOMEN AND MINORS

We found a predominant number of mentions in the 'asylum' category related to topics such as 'Schengen Area', 'external borders', 'reception', 'relocation and transfer' and 'national governments'. Based on an initial analysis, the preponderance of these topics in the news articles with a positive message seems to suggest an emphasis on the idea of defence of EU territory above

the rights of refugees, which will be compared below against the information found in our review of primary sources.

Figure 3: Graph showing percentages of mentions of all 'asylum' subcategories.

The 'reception' of refugees and their 'relocation and transfer' were two of the most sensitive topics in the study. In compliance with the principles of mandatory reception of refugees in situations of displacement due to war or armed conflict, pursuant to the *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, the European Parliament advocated a solution of assigning mandatory quotas to EU countries in order to share out the migratory burden and expedite transfer from migration hotspots to safer states. According to a publication on 16 September 2015, at its plenary session the EU Parliament resolved to relocate 120,000 refugees over the following two years, to which all member states initially committed. As shown in the graph, both 'relocation' and 'distribution' were framed with a mostly positive tone. This reflects the considerable urgency and support given by the EU to this issue while it advocated for joint action by all member states.

Despite the resolutions of the Commission, according to statistics from the European Publications Office, as of July 2016 only 3,000 asylum seekers had been relocated, representing less than a third of the number agreed. In this period a total of approximately 600,000 migrants and refugees entered Europe, mainly via the Greek and Italian coasts, to face pitiful conditions in the refugee camps at the so-called hotspots, while waiting for relocation to safe nations. As reflected in the data collected in the analysis of primary sources, Chapter 2 of the Report by the Spanish Commission for Refugee Aid (CEAR) describes how in September 2017, by the end of the period established for completion of the resettlement commitments, it was clear that the policy adopted in the wake of the resolutions of the EU Commission Agenda in March 2016 had been a resounding failure.

The low number of actual relocations, in addition to demonstrating the ineffectiveness of the EU, reflects 'the reluctance of other EU members that wash their hands of the problem and refuse to accept any community mechanism' (Sanahuja 2016: 78). Here once again arises the principle of subsidiarity, which in a manner analogous to the processes of pluralism and concentration exposes the existence of a spiral of dissemblance in the EU's institutional information policy.

The categories of ‘reception’ and ‘points of access’ garnered thirteen mentions in total and are represented in the content with a positive tone in 71 per cent and 70 per cent of cases, respectively. According to the UNHCR global trends described in the report, although the statistics reflect both the applications received each year and the total refugee population, the actual number of refugees received by national governments is unknown as these do not give a real picture of the magnitude of the phenomenon.

Also significant are the findings related to ‘returns’ and ‘expulsion’ of refugees who have reached the borders. First of all, it was observed that return is framed as a positive, well-received phenomenon, with 67 per cent of mentions, when it is an issue that has sparked controversy due to the imbalanced, inconsistent nature of such returns and the lack of coherent agreements guaranteeing the safety of refugees when they get back to their countries of origin. Even more alarming is the informational silence found in the study on the topic of ‘expulsion’, when even the data published by the UNHCR in UN News on 1 July 2015 exposes the speculation about the increasingly harsh measures of arbitrary expulsion due to the presence of refugees with allegedly irregular status. Both these subcategories are related to ‘return policy’, which was framed positively (67 per cent) even though the data from the documentation demonstrate the negative impact of the absence of a common European mechanism for returning immigrants who did not apply for refugee status.

The measures described in the Parliament report *The Migration Issue*, prepared in 2019 by the European Parliamentary Research Service, refer precisely to the way in which the return and readmission of immigrants who were ineligible for refugee status was carried out. It was not until 2017 that a binding plan for the implementation for the implementation of returns was approved: the *EU Action Plan on Return*. Attempts were made to reinforce this project with cooperation plans with African countries like Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Senegal, but tense bilateral situations with other countries, especially in the Middle East, due to political factors like the position and participation of the EU in armed conflicts, made the process of reception and location of applicants in the refugee camps even more difficult.

The results show that the categories of ‘external borders’, ‘open borders’ and ‘border crossing’ were the ones that received the most mentions, reflecting the centrality of this topic in asylum policy. The plenary debates maintain a positive tone in relation to border control, and the

optimisation of legal routes of entry into European territory is proposed as an alternative to the deployment of strict reception mechanisms.

The news articles analysed show a high level of concern for topics on the agenda related to women and minors, with a total of seventeen and eight mentions, respectively. The discourse of the EU appears to be predominantly positive and supportive in both these categories, which are recognised as among the most sensitive issues to be reformed in a common European asylum policy. At the same time, the connections with the topics of ‘relocation’ and ‘refugee camps’ have a serious impact on the inhumane and unhygienic living conditions and reveal the need for a cross-cutting gender-focused approach in the common asylum policy. At the same time, the disappearance of children who reach EU borders and are then lost after applying for international protection are a concern among MEPs.

However, a surprising finding in the study was that there are almost as many neutral mentions as positive ones for these topics. In the case of ‘minors’, 59 per cent are positive while 41 per cent are neutral, while for ‘women’ the split is 50 per cent and 50 per cent. While we do not wish to speculate on the reasons behind this, it could be argued that the EU is effective in bringing up the debate and exposing the situation described above, but avoids making evaluative judgements or exploring the causes, trying instead to construct a neutral frame through numbers and statistics alone.

We will now consider the results related to the news framing of ‘national governments’ and the ‘European Union’. A review of the results reveals that ‘national governments’, in addition to being one of the most mentioned categories in the total count, had a predominantly negative connotation, with 43 per cent compared to the category ‘European Union’, which was associated with a more positive tone (56 per cent).

This negative view of governments is a recurrent feature in the news, in the criticism by EU institutions of the slow response of national governments to adopt measures in a crisis situation. In information published on 11 May 2016, President Schulz made a desperate call for solidarity among EU states and compliance with the measures adopted by the plenary for the resettlement plan. He also criticised ‘member states’ slowness to deliver on their pledges to pay for more help for refugees, and more manpower to process them at EU borders.’ Similarly, in earlier declarations on 26 October 2015, representatives of the most cooperative states warned of the risk that the

migration crisis could provoke ‘tectonic political changes’ in the EU, or that the crisis could even end up breaking up the Union.

In our study of the subcategory of ‘crisis’, we will offer a detailed analysis of the countries of the EU and other external nations, such as Turkey. However, among EU countries we found an imbalance between the individual positions and responses, acting as sovereign states notwithstanding their membership of a supranational macro-government, and the good will of the ‘national governments’ in their disposition towards collective action.

REFUGEE RIGHTS: BETWEEN FAVOURABLE TREATMENT AND INFORMATIONAL SILENCE

As noted above, the category of ‘rights’ produced some interesting results, especially in relation to instances of informational silence and for being the most decentralising issue in European migration policy.

The mentions of this topic group were less significant, with subcategories like ‘residence’ with three mentions, ‘access to courts’ with five, and ‘social assistance’ with four. Primary reasons for this low number of mentions will be related hereinafter to the framing of the information as an emergency crisis and the handling of its most obvious consequences, such as refugee reception, distribution or resettlement, above the implementation of relevant mechanisms for effective integration of refugees in accordance with humanitarian law.

Figure 4: Graph showing percentages of mentions of all ‘asylum’ subcategories.

Although only a few references were found to the category ‘identity documents’ (six in all), their tone is positive as the European Union advocates a centralised information system for asylum management that would permit the identification of basic data on refugees. However, it was not until 2018, after the timeframe covered by this study, that MEPs reached an agreement on updating EURODAC, the database for the registration of refugee claimants.

In terms of the social guarantees that ultimately determine the effective integration of refugees into the community where they have been received, we found that ‘health’, ‘housing’, ‘employment’ and ‘integration’ all have a predominantly positive framing. Out of the 91 news articles consulted, only one in 2016 and another in 2017 addressed the processes of social

integration of refugees into the communities of the receiving countries. These state that this is a task that falls on the national governments and thus the EU exempts itself from responsibility for the matter. However, there are several regulatory documents that assign responsibilities to the EU for the system for integration of nationals from non-EU countries.

The eleven basic principles adopted by the EU's Justice and Home Affairs Council in 2004 refer to integration as a two-way phenomenon between member states, immigrants and the European Union as an institution. Article 5 of the *Treaty of Lisbon* of 2009, titled 'Area of Liberty, Security and Justice', establishes that EU institutions are able to legislate on the integration of refugees in relation to access to education, integration into the labour market, and the 'blue card' for highly qualified workers.

The report *Refugees: Social Inclusion and Integration into the Labour Market*, published in July 2016, decries the lack of clarity in the use of the concepts 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' in public and political discourse. It also decries the bureaucratic procedures of national governments that hinder asylum claim processing, access to education, professional training, and community orientation, programs that operate in many cases with EU funding.

CRISIS: DENUNCIATION, INSTITUTIONAL FRAMING AND A SPIRAL OF DISSEMBLANCE

The category of 'crisis' had the most negative framing of the whole study, due to the presence of topics like 'terrorism', with 85 per cent, 'irregular immigration' with 56 per cent and 'refugee camps' with 54 per cent. A qualitative interpretation of the results found that the negative mentions are not due solely to reporting on certain contradictory phenomena such as terrorist attacks or the precarious conditions in refugee camps, but to the implicit connotation of these subcategories as issues that needed to be corrected or mitigated by the EU based on the notion of national security and protection. The analysis as a whole also revealed the correlation that the media attempted to make between refugees and terrorists, which has been a key, pivotal point in this study's attempt to connect EU discourse with the connotations made of the crisis in society and the media.

Figure 5: Graph showing percentage of topic mentions in 'crisis' category.

There are also noticeably low numbers of references to the topics ‘deaths at sea’, ‘search and rescue’ and ‘rescue operations’, which collectively had a total of only two mentions. From 2015 to 2017, the total number of fatalities in the Mediterranean crossings to reach safe shores was 14,652, according to the IOM. However, as reflected in the results of this study, the EU kept silent on this issue, which again supports our assumption in relation to the existence of certain intentions to frame events in keeping with institutional interests. Moreover, the EU left the responsibility for the crisis in the hands of the national governments, which were blamed for budget cuts and refusals to work collaboratively.

The implementation in February 2016 of a military operation to support FRONTEX (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency), in a joint initiative by Greece, Germany and Turkey to intercept migrants and refugees in the Aegean Sea, was an extreme measure that marked the closure of Balkan borders and the failure of the resettlement mechanism. However, this kind of information received no Parliament news coverage during that period of time. This is due above all to the fact that the reinforcement and hardening of return policies and practices, far from contributing to a safer plan for legal entry, resulted in more refugees coming to Europe by sea, as reflected in the IOM data contained in the CEAR report, which indicates that 92 per cent of the total arrived this way.

In fact, a news story published on 14 July 2014 asserted that ‘irregular immigration’, with a negative framing (56 per cent) of immigrants, was placing huge pressure on border authorities and that the new European border agency would have to reinforce joint management of sea and land operations, especially in sensitive situations on the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, in the same period of the year, according to IOM reports, travel by sea was the most widely used option by asylum seekers to reach Europe.

The very few mentions of topics like ‘rejection’ (with just four mentions) and ‘social issues’ (informational silence), associated with the lack of solidarity exhibited by national governments, once again reflects a kind of dissemblance in relation to the phenomena that were of gravest concern for international opinion, especially in cases related to notions of border security and national defence. Despite the evidence of a dysfunctional policy for management of the crisis and the acceptance and subsequent relocation of refugees, the EU maintained a discourse in favour of receiving and admitting migrants fleeing countries in conflict.

We will now offer an analysis of the behaviour of individual countries in terms of their acceptance rates of asylum seekers in relation to the number of appearances in the news and the tone with which they were framed. The statistics cited here were taken from the EU Parliament website, specifically the infographic titled *Evolution of the number of asylum seekers and refugees in the EU*.

The first case we will consider is the United Kingdom, a key country in the development of the crisis and the subsequent political consequences for its departure from the EU. In 2015, some 38,800 people sought asylum, bringing the total number of refugees living in the country to 123,000. One year later, in 2016, there was a total of 38,750 claimants, less than the previous year, despite the fact that this was the worst period of the crisis, and the number of refugee claimants who were accepted as refugees was also lower. As shown in the previous graph, the United Kingdom, a country that openly adopted conservative, Eurosceptic positions to halt the EU's reception of refugees, had 100 per cent neutral mentions in our study,

Meanwhile, for Germany a figure of 476,510 asylum claimants is given for 2015, with a total number of accepted refugees of 316,115. Although this figure may seem contradictory, in 2016 there was a similar correlation, with a massive increase in the number of claimants, to 745,175, while the total number accepted was 669,482. This implicitly suggests that close to 100,000 asylum claims were denied each year by the German government; however, both the number of claims received and the number accepted were four times higher than any other EU country. In its framing in the news, 'Germany' had 67 per cent positive mentions and 33 per cent neutral mentions.

Greece was the main hotspot for entry into the European Union via the Central Mediterranean route. The statistics for this country reflect an unusually low number of refugee and asylum claims, with just 13,000 claimants in 2015 compared to 18,489 refugees, while in 2016 the number grew to 51,110 claimants. The situation for this country is similar to that of Italy; however, the gaps in administration and documentation were bigger due to the marked difference in the actions of the authorities on continental Greece compared to those on the Aegean Islands, which means that the number of unregistered refugees on Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Leros and Kos are estimated to be much higher. What is clear is that the attempts to unify the will of EU member states were insufficient for the reform of the Common European Asylum System and the adoption of short-term measures, above all due to the resounding failure of the system of relocation based on mandatory quotas. The EU's ongoing dissemblance in the publications of the European

Parliament's Press Room in relation to the events unfolding on the Greek islands is even clearer, as the tone taken with respect to the actions of the Greek government is predominantly neutral (69 per cent).

The case of Turkey is worthy of special mention. The results of the content analysis are quite revealing, as they show that this country had a predominance of negative mentions, with 39 per cent of the total. Although negotiations between the EU and Turkey progressed towards the preparation of a 3,000 million euro budget to manage the crisis with Turkey as a strategic transit country, the barriers imposed by the governments on the European Council blocked the decisions that needed to be made for centralised action on immigration, especially due to the entry onto the stage of other political interests. This was the case for the debates about 'liberalising visas for Turkish citizens who wanted to travel to the EU, and stepping up negotiations for Turkey to enter the EU', which, according to a VPR publication on 8 March 2016, was being used as a bargaining chip to slow down decision making.

In the case of Hungary, the figure for asylum claims in 2015 is staggering compared to the number of refugees accepted in the country: 177,135 claimants with just 4,393 refugees living in the country. The situation did not improve in 2016, with 29,430 claimants and 4,748 accepted refugees. This clearly shows that from one year to the next the number of refugees increased by only 300, which can be explained by the mass deportations and police repression deployed in the country on its border. Nevertheless, even when the EU reports made reference to the tense situation of the 'Visegrád Group' of countries, the mentions of 'Hungary' are neutral in 100 per cent of cases.

The reports of the European Commission and CEAR help us to link the positioning of member states to factors external to immigration. These reports indicate the proliferation and electoral success of political parties and the formation of coalitions with anti-immigration discourses, which effectively halted the development of a collaborative response that was already being slowed down as it was. Moreover, there is also evidence of an emerging trend of criminalisation of refugees, although in 2017 this discourse had not yet fully taken root.

All of this reflects a kind of hegemony of individual member states over the EU institutions that strived to build a collaborative response to the crisis. The documentary sources analysed suggest that 2016 was the most fruitless year in relation to legislative reform of the Common

European Asylum System, which to a large extent fell back on the principles of the Dublin III Regulation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As this study has shown, there is a divergence between the news stories published by the European Parliament's Virtual Press Room and the effective application of actual policies in relation to the refugee issue. As the crisis continues to affect Europe, the deadlines for the development of the necessary reforms seem to get increasingly blurry. The results described above shed light on the EU's ineffectiveness as a supranational government in a real context of supposedly shared governance, given the obvious asymmetries between member states in relation to the reception, resettlement and relocation of refugees. The result is the coexistence in the political framework itself 'of national and EU competencies, in a context of government that is incomplete and dysfunctional' (Sanahuja 2016: 78). This reflects the marked presence of a principle of subsidiarity whereby the European burden is distributed based on the political will of individual countries, all of which is reflected in a growing spiral of dissemblance.

There are thus obvious political interests at play behind the distinctions made in the terminology related to refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers, coinciding with the rise of right-wing political parties in Europe and with the fear of immigration and its possible consequences for national economies. The facts revealed by this research show that any individual who arrives at the EU's land or sea borders from regions at war or fleeing persecution is classified as a refugee according to international law and as such should receive immediate international protection. However, the lack of a specific agreement on the shared policies that needed to be reformed resulted in the application of disparate and arbitrary mechanisms for the reception and distribution of refugees, a situation that the VPR does not mention until 2017.

Thus, in its news coverage over the two-year period studied, we can see how the European Union applied a news framing strategy whereby, first of all, it carefully managed the tone of the information it published to refer to more sensitive phenomena that might have given rise to aberrant interpretations contrary to its discourse, as in the case of 'reception', 'entry of immigrants', 'relocation and transfer', and 'border control'. In these cases, it strived to maintain a positive, upbeat discourse on its role in the handling of the situation and the search for viable solutions to deal with it.

Secondly, it again applied the framing strategy to the number of references to issues external to the EU's institutional responsibility as a way of maintaining its credibility; there are thus frequent, significant references to 'national governments', the countries that had the biggest responsibility, like Greece and Italy, and external countries like Turkey. In these cases, it chose to alternate between predominantly neutral and negative discourses. Finally, the EU applies a kind of silencing strategy for topics related to 'refugee rights' and 'social integration', suggesting a strategy to divert attention from an area where the policies are not EU policies, and are neither effective nor just.

In short, the most significant findings of this research can be summarised in the following terms:

1. Both in the EU Parliament sessions reported in the news articles and in the summits and councils of MEPs, there are clear divergences between developing a common asylum policy and leaving the frameworks for action in the hands of national governments. This double agenda ultimately had the effect of undermining the European Union as a supposed supranational government and its capacity to coordinate an effective joint response to the crisis, and provoked a chain effect that had drastic repercussions on the processes of 'entry of immigrants', 'reception', and 'relocation and transfer', as well as asylum policy reform.

2. The news content is characterised by a predominantly positive or neutral discourse, as well as the calls for solidarity, 'humanitarian aid' and the safeguarding of 'human rights'. However, at the same time, the EU Parliament, Commission and Council all published reports and proposals for reforming the Common European Asylum System that surreptitiously promoted hardening border controls, limiting arrivals from outside the EU, closing the open routes of the Schengen Area to restrict the movement of refugees, and implementing effective legal mechanisms for returning refugees to their countries of origin. This reveals two contradictory discourses, one declared publicly and the other adopted in internal reports.

3. There is an evident attempt to overlook the statistics on the negligent conduct of the EU and even of national governments in the reception of refugees, especially in situations involving arrivals via dangerous routes like the Mediterranean and Aegean seas. This is even the case at the end of 2016, a moment falling within the study period, when the numbers of deaths at sea reached their peak of more than 5,000. This situation of informational silence supports our explanation of the existence of news frames to present each category separately, and to avoid providing the

user/reader with sufficient tools to connect certain situations with others and identify the institutional ideologies present in the information.

4. There are asymmetries in the distribution of the migratory burden among member states and the framing that those states received in the discourse of the European Parliament. This reflects a strategy to divert public attention towards the efforts of the EU to negotiate a joint strategy with member states and the attempts to reach out to non-EU countries like Turkey or Lebanon. Meanwhile, border control operations, police repression on external borders, deficient administration at refugee centres, mass deportations of refugees under unjust or illegal conditions and the failure of the relocation and transfer plan based on mandatory quotas all occupied less than 10 per cent of the total number of news articles.

5. In view of the divergences of member states which, as the content analysis shows, had no intention of adhering to the Dublin Regulation or the system of resettlements proposed by the Commission in 2015, the EU sought to externalize the crisis in the context of negotiations with Turkey and Lebanon and the capacity of these countries to contain the flow of immigrants arriving at their borders and to accept deportees. On the one hand, the EU recognised the centrality of Turkey as the main receiving country for immigrants, and this is reflected in its discourse, with high percentages of positive and neutral mentions; but on the other, it criticises the position taken by Turkey and its attempt to negotiate its entry into the EU using the migration crisis as a bargaining chip.

In view of the above, we would suggest that the EU 'shapes opinions on the information' (Giménez Armentia 2006: 57) by deliberately using news frames to establish a context for the reality presented and thought patterns incorporated into the external objective data (Sebastián de Erice 1994 cited in Giménez Armentia 2006: 7).

The results of this analysis suggest that the discourse of the Virtual Press Room is predominantly positive on the topic of refugees and the EU's response to the issue. However, there is an evident contradiction between the news coverage of the topics of asylum, crisis and rights, and the operational response of the European Union on the ground in the years covered by the study, which effectively confirms our initial hypothesis. This critical analysis thus demonstrates the existence of a spiral of dissemblance in relation to coverage of the refugee issue by the European Parliament VPR, reinforcing corporate, administrative and quantitative dynamics. As a future line of research, we believe it would be worth exploring whether the communicative logic

described here in relation to the European Parliament extends to other institutions in the sector, in a context where there is a wide gap between informational discourse and political action. To this end, we believe this study could be complemented with interviews and focus groups with EU journalists who work for VPRs. It would thus also be valuable to obtain information on journalistic routines, institutional filters and sources of information on the refugee issue.

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