Refugee Representations by the Greek Public Administration: A Critical Review of the Greek Institutional Discourse

Aspiadis Neofytos
University of Patras (Greece)

This paper examines the political narratives employed in strategic communication between Greek authorities and the public administration during the refugee flows of 2015-2018. It also looks into the formation of images concerning refugees within the Greek political context and contributes to the existing literature on discursive representations of refugees. The study delves into the role of political rhetoric in strategic or non-strategic image formation, thus revealing the other side of media representations. It focuses on an overlooked aspect of political communication: the discourse of public administration institutions. The methodology uses qualitative content analysis, focusing on press releases from public administration institutions involved in the refugee crisis, as well as a selected corpus of public speeches from government members and local authorities. The institutions examined include the Ministry of Migration Policy, the Regional Administration of North Aegean, and the Regional Administration of South Aegean. The research covers the period from January 2015 to April 2018, encompassing a total of 159 press releases issued by the authorities under study regarding the refugee situation.

Keywords: refugee crisis, political discourses, public administration, images of refugees, political representations.

Europe faced an unprecedented migration and refugee crisis during the years of 2015-2018, which continues today, as a result of the ongoing civil war in Syria, which began in 2011 and has resulted in millions of refugees and internally displaced persons (Fotopoulos and Kaimaklioti, 2016). However, the phenomenon of refugees trying to come into Europe is not new. In 2014, more than 200,000 refugees and migrants fled for safety across the
Mediterranean Sea, crammed into overcrowded, unsafe boats, and thousands drowned (Colombo, 2018).

The refugee crisis has dominated the news in Greece and Europe throughout the winter of 2015 and spring of 2016. The so-called refugee crisis must be understood with the 2008 financial crisis in the background where austerity measures in the Eurozone benefitted right-wing and fascist parties across the continent; but the restrictions on migration themselves adhere to repressive measures post-9/11 (Sajir and Aouragh, 2019). The crisis has managed to change the image of Greece for a period, spinning the financial crisis agenda. However, that did not change the fact that the great flows of immigrants and refugees constituted a crisis within a crisis for Greece since it affected economic and social life in the Greek islands (Ivanov and Stavrinoudis, 2018; Tsartas et al., 2020). The Greek Government had to act swiftly to manage the flows and prepare the necessary infrastructure to accommodate and identify the incoming populations.

Quickly the positive image of the “hospitable” and “humane” Greece gave its place to the image of an “unorganized” Greece that was not able to handle the crisis (Dimitriou and Filippakou, 2017). In this case, the Greek government together with the regional authorities needed to keep control of the information flow and build on strategic communication messaging that would help manage effectively not only the image crisis but also subjective issues of the overall crisis. This crisis management attempt led the Greek authorities to an image formation that sometimes was strategic and sometimes a result of their attempts to manage the situation.

This paper examines the political narratives used within the context of Strategic Communication between the Greek authorities and the Public Administration during the refugee flows of 2015-2018 and the images formed during that process for the refugees in the Greek political environment. The paper contributes to the existing literature on discursive representations of refugees and political and strategic communication in relation to strategic or non-strategic image formation through political rhetoric. This is a parallel aspect of media narratives and shows the other side of media representations. The research is focusing on an understudied aspect of political communication which is the discourse of regional public administration institutions.

The paper consists of five sections beginning with a short theoretical overview of the way refugee crises have been represented in media discourse, the relation, and the role of the political discourse in image formation, and the basic frames used for the representations and their practical implications. The case study section includes the methodology used for the analysis, the results, and the discussion of the findings before coming to the basic conclusions of the study.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT: MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF REFUGEES AND THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Immigration has increasingly been a topic and has been constructed as a law-and-order issue on the political and public agenda (Colombo, 2013). Media representations of the refugees vary usually according to the medium, the
country, and the way the political discourse was framed (Gale, 2004; Colombo, 2013; Fotopoulos and Kaimaklioti, 2016; Romano, 2019; Cooper et al., 2021). It remains however a primary way of attitude formation towards the “otherness”.

Media representations play a significant role in the way refugees might be perceived by the public or in the way the political discourse may articulate. The success of such discourses, among other things, may impact voting behaviour, meaning that government policy, to an extent, is influenced by media discourse (Baker and McEnery, 2005). Indeed, in some cases, politicians and journalists have commonly employed terms like ‘massive invasion’ and ‘plague’ to describe the phenomenon (Colombo, 2013).

The terms used in news broadcasts and online media as well as the discourse used by political elites frame the situation in a certain way and construct images for the refugees. These discourses usually differ from official terminology used by international organizations and characterize the status of the incoming populations. For example, an asylum seeker is recognized as a person seeking refugee status while a refugee is defined under the UN definition as being a person who has been identified as a refugee, however, those categories are often used interchangeably in media discourse (Gale, 2004). Through framing, speakers express their involvement in discourse and position their point of view in the reporting, description, narration, or quotation of relevant events or utterances (Colombo, 2018).

The refugee situation was framed by the media in different ways throughout the years. The “crisis” frame is a very common frame used in the news and political discourse for refugee flows. The expressions “European migrant crisis” and “European refugee crisis” have been widely used, especially after the drowning tragedies in the Mediterranean Sea that shocked public opinion in April 2015, producing diverse and contradictory political, media, and popular discourses (Colombo, 2018). But the notion of “crisis” in describing these human tragedies has dehumanizing effects on refugees by extracting their personal and collective struggles from dictatorship and overall imperial systems of oppression (Sajir and Aouragh, 2019).

In addition, a crisis includes connotations of blame attribution and management. The ‘crisis’ narrative was punctuated by images of refugee children and displays of human grief associated with the reporting on the Tampa and asylum seekers (Gale, 2004). Reframing the act of migration of people as a crisis and transferring the blame for the failure of asylum policies to the very group of people who need solidarity engender demoralizing and devastating effects (Sajir and Aouragh, 2019). This way the refugees are constructed as a “natural disaster” like a flood, which is difficult to control as it has no sense of its agency (Baker and Mcenery, 2005). Moreover, blaming the victim has been an integral part of the refugee crisis, framed as a wave of panic hitting Europe (Sajir and Aouragh, 2019). Nevertheless, the representation of the refugee flows as a crisis includes also humanitarian aspects like framing in terms of “humanitarian crisis”. The ‘human face’ theme incorporates a humanitarian perspective that can be illustrated by images and headlines of the human suffering of the refugees (Gale, 2004).
Another way of framing the refugees in the media was in the context of fear. Fear of difference has been a feature of colonial discourse and is a recurring theme within political discourse (Gale, 2004). Usually, a fear frame was used in the context of terrorism and the fear of ISIS (Sajir and Aouragh, 2019). Under this context, refugees are seen as threats to national security and culture/communities (Colombo, 2018). The fear and terrorism frame of reference originates from the media reporting a political discourse on the ‘war against terrorism, where ‘border protection’ was represented as part of a war against the Other (Gale, 2004). According to Fotopoulos and Kaimaklioti (2016), however, not every media discourse in Europe used the correlation between terrorism and refugees. For example, according to their research in Greek, German, and British media, the Greek and German press did not include in a percentage worth mentioning the words ‘terrorists’, ‘terrorism’, ‘ISIL’, ‘IS’, or ‘ISIS’ whereas, in Britain, the percentage of the linkage was much higher.

All these representations lead to a dehumanization effect on the refugees. As Baker and McEnery (2005) suggest in their research, “an initial analysis reveals that refugees are commonly described in terms of where they are from (e.g. Sierra Leone, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iran, Kosovo, Algeria, etc.), where they currently are (France, Sangatte, the Belgian border, etc.) or where they are going. A smaller set of terms describes refugees in terms of the circumstances which created them, although these words are vague (economic, political, war, wartime)”. The reference to the country of origin may play a role in constructing an image of a “good” or “bad” refugee. On the other hand, as Sajir and Aouragh (2019) suggest, a reductionism takes place as Syrians are reduced to “refugees,” who are in turn reduced to “Syrians,” who are in turn reduced to “crises”.

This circular logic projected usually indirectly in media representations leads to a dehumanization effect on the refugees and migrants. Moreover, the negative representation is realized mainly using two powerful, dehumanizing metaphors (the tide of refugees, and the migrant flows) (Serafis et al., 2021). Refugees are also constructed in terms of metaphors and connotational verbs which construct them as transported goods, particularly illegal substances again, as a token of their dehumanization (Baker and McEnery, 2005). Pictures in the news and social media can also have a dehumanization effect in the way they present the refugees. Photography can humanize the subject, or on the contrary, dehumanize it, fostering negative responses (Sajir and Aouragh, 2019).

Political discourses play a significant role in the formation of those frames and images for the refugees. Political strategic communication usually driven by the campaign mode defines the terms and frames the political discussion. The campaign mode is “a state of mind that combines a visceral drive to win elections with a deep-seated habit of strategic thinking” (Burton and Shea, 2002, p. 4). The political actors operate under the “campaign mode”, which expresses their strategic thinking and is motivated by their will to prevail in the elections (Takas and Samaras, 2016). Especially during crises, the communication model of media-state relations changes and minimizes the differences in agenda-setting and counter-framing among political elites and the media.
Entman (2003; 2004) and Entman and Usher (2018) in his cascade model explains that frames activate and spread among elites, journalists, and citizens through strategic and non-strategic communication. A down–to–top approach is also possible through the CNN effect theory (Bahador, 2007; Belknap, 2002; Gilboa, 2005) where news media frames and presentation of news may affect governmental decision-making.

By framing the refugee flows as a “crisis”, governmental institutions may initiate the mechanism of frame dominance as explained by the cascade model and influence the public discourse. In addition, the image of a country as well as the images of other collective subjects like the refugees is produced by the combined operation of the news-making process, the strategies of actors, and domestic and international events (Iordanidou and Samaras, 2014; Aspriadis et al., 2017). As a result, through the framing mechanisms, strategic communication of the perception management for a situation, and media representations that are either self–produced or politically influenced, certain images may be formed and were formed for the refugees during the major inflows of 2015-2018.

In the next sections, the paper will elaborate on the images of the refugees constructed by the strategic communication of the governmental and administrative institutions in Greece.

METHODOLOGY

The paper examines the narratives developed through the Strategic Communication between the Greek authorities and the Public Administration during the refugee crisis in Greece. It looks at how five basic Public Administration Institutions depicted the situation of the Refugee flows on the Greek islands from January 2015 – April 2018.

For this purpose, five main research questions are being discussed:

• RQ1) What were the frames used by the Greek Public Administration Institutions for the depiction of the refugees during the crisis?
• RQ2) What images did these frames form for the refugees?
• RQ3) What are the main strategic communications messages used by Public Administration Institutions in terms of crisis communication?
• RQ4) What are the main differences between the strategic communication processes of the Institutions?

The research uses qualitative content analysis with elements from discourse analysis to examine the above-mentioned research questions. Qualitative content analysis is appropriate for a relatively small amount of textual matter (Krippendorff, 2004; Evera, 1997) giving the liberty of viewing the case from the inside out and seeing it from the perspective of those involved (Gillham, 2000).

On the other hand, discourse analysis (Dijk, 1997; Filardo-Llamas and Boyd, 2018) helps in identifying discursive resources that perform social actions such as blaming, justifying, rationalizing, and constructing particular social identities for
speakers and those who are positioned as other (Augoustinos and Every, 2007). This means that discourse analysis may show words and language styles that may form images of the otherness. In addition, the study incorporates frame analysis (Entman, 2003; 2004) as a tool for identifying frames and narratives in the discourses under study and the image restoration typology by Benoit (1995) to identify the crisis communication efforts of the Greek Public Administration Institutions. Through the discourse analysis words, semantic ecologies, and arguments used were spotted and highlighted. Then, they were grouped into general categories according to their frame context. Then those categories were analysed as frames.

In particular, the unit of analysis for the research were the Press Releases of the Public Administration Institutions involved in the refugee crisis. The Press Releases consist of discursive constructions that highlight the issuing institution’s (world-) views. Those constructions may include rhetorical strategies, frames, or other discursive elements. The analysis focuses on the detection of those constructions that form frames and narratives.

The Press Releases, however, in comparison to rhetorical speeches have a significant difference. They usually do not include the whole public speech of the political leader they are referring to or they comment on a certain situation, which means they may use indirect speech. In any case, however, they are including and projecting views and opinions, which in turn may form certain images. Therefore, Press Releases remain a speech act that may be analysed through qualitative content analysis.

In particular, the Institutions examined were the Greek Ministry of Migration Policy, the Regional Administration of North Aegean, and the Regional Administration of South Aegean. Those Institutions were chosen because of their imminent relation with the handling of the refugee situation. The two regional administrations are responsible for the Islands of the east Aegean which was at that time a main refugee entrance to Greece. The Ministry of Migration Policy, on the other hand, is the main political institution for the handling of refugee flows.

The period of the analysis was from January 2015 until April 2018. In total N=159 Press Releases have been issued by the authorities under study for the refugee situation. The Press Releases were gathered according to their title in reference to the refugee situation.

FINDINGS

More than one million people seeking international protection, mostly from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq, have entered Greece through Turkey since January 2015 (Clayton, 2016). The year 2015 was recorded as “Europe’s refugee crisis” (Splinder, 2015) with major flows arriving at the islands of Greece. At that time, Greece suffered from the financial crisis of 2009 and initiated a renegotiation campaign with its European partners for the bail-out terms (Artelaris and Tsirbas, 2018; Aspriadis et al., 2020; Tsirbas, 2016). During
this challenging period for Greece, the refugee crisis put additional pressure on the Greek government. The renegotiation process together with the refugee crisis and the incapability to handle the situation had a direct impact on the image of Greece at that time.

This section presents the main findings of the qualitative content analysis in the press releases of the main Public Administration Institutions related to the handling of the refugee flows. The analysis, as discussed in the methodology section, focuses on the frames that were developed through the discursive constructions in the press releases.

The main institutions immediately affected and preoccupied with the handling of the refugee flows were the Regional Administrations of North and South Aegean, and the Ministry of Migration Policy. All three Public Administration institutions framed the situation primarily as a crisis. The crisis frame includes images of a problem and management practices. It also initiates blaming strategies and attack/defense positions. This stance can be seen in their press releases issued to inform about the situation.

Our country phases today a serious and big crisis which goes far beyond the financial crisis (Regional Administration of South Aegean, 18.09.2015).

The management of this big and unpredictable issue (Regional Administration of North Aegean, 19.03.2016).

The crisis frame also affected the depiction of the refugees and migrants as they were seen primarily as a problem and an obstruction in the normality of regional life and governmental “business”. In addition, the refugee problem was being compared to the financial crisis and was therefore seen in the same terms.

The Regional Administration of North Aegean issued 67 Press Releases related to the “migration – refugee crisis”. The Press releases were issued from the beginning of the crisis focusing on the procedures undertaken by the Regional Administration to handle the situation. Their strategic communications efforts aimed at bolstering their image for positive crisis management outcomes and at blaming the central government for any mismanagement of the situation and for the lack of the infrastructure to host the refugees.

The refugees were being framed in terms of problems for the region, for the country, and for the European Union mostly to mobilize help.

We all have to admit that this crisis will not fade away and will affect all the member – states... (Regional Administration of North Aegean, 15.10.2015).

The refugee problem is a problem for the whole of Europe and as such, it needs to be addressed, immediately (Regional Administration of North Aegean, 20.05.2015).

The consequences in the everyday life of the people are exacerbating the already tragic situation that our islands experience (Regional Administration of North Aegean, 26.02.2016).
The humanitarian frame was another frame used by the Regional Administration. By framing the situation in humanitarian terms, the Regional Administration was indirectly bolstering its image.

We all have a duty to stand in a spirit of solidarity and humanity and with efficiency in what we have in front of us (Regional Administration of North Aegean, 15.03.2016).

The Regional Administration of Northern Greece attacked mainly the central government for not being able to provide the help it needed to manage the situation. Every mismanagement was attributed to the State and/or Europe for not helping the situation.

The E.C. tries to fit the humanitarian crisis into a technical report (Regional Administration of North Aegean, 05.11.2015).

We have to stop talking about reorganizing the public sector, avoid the drawbacks and take initiative directly at the national level (Regional Administration of North Aegean, 22.06.2015).

The Regional Administration of the South Aegean issued 30 press releases concerning the refugee crisis on the islands. Its overall communication efforts differ from that of the North Aegean. Their strategic communication relied more on bolstering the good image from the good management of the local authorities rather than on attack strategies. The main strategy used by the Regional Administration was Bolstering. It focused on the good work done by the local authorities and the people in managing the crisis.

The strategic frames used mostly were the European problem —solidarity frame and the humanitarian crisis frame. The European problem —solidarity frame was referring to the European help in handling the crisis. In the framework of the crisis frame, a war analogy was used for the refugee situation. This analogy practically strengthens the crisis frame, although it is used to enhance the European problem — Solidarity frame, because the war analogy shows that the refugee situation is seen as a threat, as a sudden situation, or as a war-like situation.

To date, we have fought many battles alone, some we have won, and some we have lost. However, without Europe on our side, we have no hope of winning the war. The fact that the prediction we made a year ago is being confirmed, that this problem will soon be in the backyard of every European, does not make us happy (Regional Administration of South Aegean, 04.09.2015).

The humanitarian crisis frame differs from the humanitarian frame mentioned above. The first links the refugee situation to an extraordinary and island-threatening crisis involving innocent people, while the humanitarian frame refers to the humanitarian assistance provided —should be provided— by local communities and governments.
During the summer, the migration crisis in the Mediterranean has reached unprecedented proportions, as the improved weather has offered smugglers the opportunity to transport more people across the dangerous crossing. At the same time, the dramatic increase in refugees traveling through the Western Balkans has shown that the emergency extends far beyond some southern European countries (Regional Administration of South Aegean, 18.09.2015).

Another frame used was the sanitary hazard frame. Through this frame, the refugees were depicted in terms of a hazard to public health in the local communities, which was a negative depiction of the refugees.

The refugee crisis is a sanitary bomb that threatens the public health of the local communities (Regional Administration of South Aegean, 20.04.2015).

The Ministry of Migration Policy was the primary responsible political authority for migration of the central government. During the refugee crisis of 2015, the ministry issued a total of 62 Press Releases concerning the issue. Usually, the press releases contained speeches and announcements of the Minister of Migration Giannis Mouzalas. In the ministry’s communication efforts, it used mostly the Strategy of Attack, Bolstering, and Strategic Framing. Specifically, the ministry attacked the media that published data considered to be false and it highlighted that the ministry is working hard to coordinate the efforts to manage the overall crisis.

In terms of framing the ministry also used the humanitarian frame, the European solidarity - problem frame, and the crisis frame to explain the situation and to highlight its processes for managing the crisis effectively. Again, the European solidarity – problem frame tried to frame the problem as a European issue and that the European Union should assist in the handling of the refugee flows.

The new Dublin in the way it is being shaped, putting all the burden on the host countries cannot be accepted, and in practice, it has been shown that refugee-immigrant flows like those faced by Greece and Italy cannot be dealt with at the national level, but they are a European issue (Ministry of Migration, 14.07.2017).

The “humanitarian frame” was used very frequently by the ministry communication, mostly to highlight a positive and caring governmental image. By this frame, the ministry attributed responsibility and inhumane characteristics to the European Union for not showing solidarity with Greece and the refugees.

At the same time, it will continue to fight responsibly at the international and European level for establishing the policy that promotes humanitarianism, solidarity, and tolerance (Ministry of Migration, 19.12.2017).

The “crisis frame” in the Ministry’s communication also included a humanitarian side promoting the managerial initiatives of the central government in managing the refugee flows and at the same time they highlighted the humanitarian aspect
to help the refugees. This stance was a political choice and not a communicational strategy to improve the image of the ministry or the government.

Additionally, to those frames, a “fake news” frame was also used to deconstruct the credibility of the articles and the media that published them. This frame included a blame-shifting practice against the media and political opponents to mitigate their attacks.

Mr. Varvitsiotis did not even bother to read the invitation, conveys fake news, which he formulates as inquiries and, pretending to be up to date, refers to the past as being future (Ministry of Migration, 12.10.2017).

The attacks on the political main opposition aimed to maintain a positive image for the handlings of the government. The minister tried to deconstruct the accusations of the political opponents mainly through direct questioning of the accuracy of the information provided. Blame Shifting and the fake news frame were directed also against the UNHCR who oversaw the refugee management procedures on the islands.

We would expect from the UNHCR a thorough and scientifically documented report that is also based on specific complaints to the competent authorities, and official data, not just limited to “anonymous experiences”. It would be particularly useful for the management of the refugee-immigrant population on the islands if there were scientific findings that would contribute —in fact— to the improvement of the living conditions in the Reception and Identification Centers (Ministry of Migration, 09.02.2018).

The purpose of the attacks was to shift the blame to outside factors of the government for any mishandling of the situation. As an answer to the critics coming from the observatory services of international organizations like the UNHCR and non-governmental agencies, the government, through the Ministry of Migration Policy promoted images of humanity and solidarity to the refugees, implying that the other organizations had different agendas. This way, the government tried to bolster its own image and enhance its credibility.

Table 1. Content analysis findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regional Administration of North Aegean</td>
<td>“The refugee problem is a problem for the whole of Europe and as such, it needs to be addressed, immediately.”</td>
<td>20/5/15</td>
<td>Problem Frame</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“We have to stop talking about reorganizing the public sector, avoid the drawbacks and take initiative directly at the national level.”</td>
<td>22/6/15</td>
<td>Blame Attribution to the National Level</td>
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<td>Institution</td>
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<td>Regional Administration of North Aegean</td>
<td>“We all have to admit that this crisis will not fade away and will affect all the member – states...”</td>
<td>15/10/15</td>
<td>Problem Frame</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“The E.C. tries to fit the humanitarian crisis into a technical report.”</td>
<td>5/11/15</td>
<td>Blame Attribution to the European Union / European Problem Frame</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“The consequences in the everyday life of the people are exacerbating the already tragic situation that our islands experience.”</td>
<td>26/2/16</td>
<td>Problem Frame</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“We all have a duty to stand in a spirit of solidarity and humanity and with efficiency in what we have in front of us.”</td>
<td>15/3/16</td>
<td>Humanitarian Frame</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“The management of this big and unpredictable issue.”</td>
<td>19/3/16</td>
<td>Crisis Frame</td>
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<td>Regional Administrations of South Aegean</td>
<td>“The Refugee crisis is a sanitary bomb that threatens the public health of the local communities.”</td>
<td>20/4/15</td>
<td>Sanitary Hazard Frame</td>
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<td>“To date, we have fought many battles alone, some we have won, and some we have lost. However, without Europe on our side, we have no hope of winning the war. The fact that the prediction we made a year ago is being confirmed, that this problem will soon be in the backyard of every European, does not make us happy.”</td>
<td>4/9/15</td>
<td>European Problem - Solidarity Frame</td>
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<td>“Our country phases today a serious and big crisis which goes far beyond the financial crisis.”</td>
<td>18/9/15</td>
<td>Crisis Frame</td>
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<td>“During the summer, the migration crisis in the Mediterranean has reached unprecedented proportions, as the improved weather has offered smugglers the opportunity to transport more people across the dangerous crossing. At the same time, the dramatic increase in refugees traveling through the Western Balkans has shown that the emergency extends far beyond some southern European countries.”</td>
<td>18/9/15</td>
<td>Humanitarian Crisis Frame</td>
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<td>Ministry of Migration</td>
<td>“The new Dublin in the way it is being shaped, putting all the burden on the host countries cannot be accepted, and in practice, it has been shown that refugee-immigrant flows like those faced by Greece and Italy cannot be dealt with at the national level, but they are a European issue.”</td>
<td>14/7/17</td>
<td>European Problem - Solidarity Frame</td>
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<td>“Mr. Varvitsiotis did not even bother to read the invitation, conveys fake news, which he formulates as inquiries and, pretending to be up to date, refers to the past as being future.”</td>
<td>12/10/17</td>
<td>Fake News Frame / Attack</td>
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<td>“At the same time, it will continue to fight responsibly at the international and European level for establishing the policy that promotes humanitarianism, solidarity, and tolerance.”</td>
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<td>9/2/18</td>
<td>Blame Shifting / Attack</td>
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Source: Own elaboration.

**DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

Regarding the first two research questions posed, the crisis frame was a common frame for all public administration institutions. The narrative construction of this frame focused on the unprecedented and huge migration outbreak. It formed an image of a very threatening situation to the stability, well-being, and health of the local island populations. The imminent crisis needed to be “handled” in the best way possible, but at the same time, the severity of the situation helped the Institutions have an excuse for any managerial errors.

This depiction of the refugee situation put the humanitarian side of the problem aside and focused on managerial aspects leading to the dehumanization of the people asking for shelter. The crisis frame as analysed above is a problematic frame as the refugees are being depicted as a problem, as a threat to normality, or as a natural disaster that will bring or leave destruction. The element of empathy is therefore minimized through this frame and blame games arise in the political
system. In addition, the crisis frame depicts the refugees as “persona non grata” as they are a problem in the well-being of a region.

A second frame used by all institutions was the European solidarity – problem frame. This frame was based on the narrative that the refugee crisis in Greece was primarily a European problem and that the European Union should help in any way possible. The frame included fear narratives to show the European people that the refugees could reach at some point their own backyard. This fear narrative was highlighted through the aspect of the “problem” of this frame.

The refugees were being depicted as a problem for the European Union implying issues of integration. Another aspect of the frame was based on the fact that the refugees did not want to stay in the economic crisis-stricken Greece but move to Europe. This practice poses an instrumentalization of the refugees, as they are being used as a threat to the European Union.

The third common frame was the solidarity – humanity (or humanitarian) frame. The narrative through this frame focused on the humanitarian side of the refugee crisis. The refugees were seen as human beings that needed primarily assistance and help with housing and feeding. The narrative was common for all institutions because of the nature of the crisis. It was a humanitarian crisis after all and the refugees’ included women and children. Apart from this point, the political aspect of the narrative aimed to bolster the image of the government and the institutions in terms of helping the refugees. The leftist government of SYRIZA at that time, promoted the humanitarian aspect of the crisis in terms of ideology, forming at the same time the image of a caring and solidary nation.

This narrative promoted the images of the weak, afflicted, and exploited refugees, building on compassion and solidarity attitudes. Pictures of rescuing people from drowning at sea and from unaccompanied children in the media enhanced the central narrative of humanitarian assistance and solidarity.

In answering the third Research Question, the findings show, that the main strategic communication messaging focused on three central aspects. The first was a blame-shifting aspect. All three Public Administration institutions tried to shift the blame to outside factors like the absence of European help or help from the central government (for the regional administrations) for the difficulty they faced to handle the situation.

The second aspect was the balance they would like to keep between their humanitarian image as caring institutions and the crisis management processes. The blame-shifting practice and the crisis frame that was used showed an image of inhumanity. This needed to be minimized in terms of crisis communication. Therefore, all institutions tried to highlight rhetorically their human face towards the situation. This practically enhanced the use of the solidarity-humanity frame.

The third aspect of crisis communication messaging was a bolstering attempt at the image of the institutions. All three institutions tried to bolster their image in terms of crisis communication. The depiction of the refugee flows as a crisis initiated the need for image restoration for the public administration institutions. In that direction, self-praise rhetoric and well-managed practices were highlighted, and any mismanagement was attributed to outside factors like the absence of help from Europe or the central government.
Regarding the fourth research question, all public administration institutions adopted the same frames. Although the strategic communication messaging was not centrally directed there seems to be a coherence in the communication strategy used. However, some differentiations in the frame and their narrative constructions indicate that each public institution served a political goal of its own.

For example, the Regional Administration of the North Aegean was quite offensive to the central government in the requests for assistance, in comparison to the Regional Administration of the South Aegean which focused more on the good work done by the local authorities and the people for managing the crisis. Another difference was that the latter focused more on the humanitarian aspect of the crisis in comparison to the first. On the other hand, the Ministry of Migration Policy tried to promote a positive image of the handling of the crisis and show an image of solidarity towards the refugees.

Finally, another interesting observation is the fact that there was not a clear definitional frame on the name of the crisis as migration or refugee crisis. The actual reason was that the flows contained both migrants and refugees. However, the political reason was to strengthen the humanity frame and the European solidarity frame. The extreme right parties used the migration frame to minimize the effect of the governmental frames. In particular, the refugees were considered worth of compassion victims as they came from countries suffering from war. However, if they were migrants then the terms changed as they did not have an imminent danger to their lives. This differentiation mattered in terms of image construction for the narrative of the political parties but in the institutional discourse, it was left undetermined.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper aimed to contribute to the existing literature on depictions of refugees, migrants, and people on the move in the media and political discourses. The analysis focused on the representations of the refugees in the institutional discourse in Greece. The political discourse is considered to be a second aspect of the media–state relationship and a primary source of media discourse. Therefore, the aspect of the political discourses and representation in the matter of the refugee provides a vital insight into how media frames may have articulated in the socio-political environment.

As the findings suggest the public administration institutions in the islands had different views on the situation that unfolded in their region of responsibility. On the one hand, they recognized the humanitarian aspect of the problem, but on the other, they tried to politically shift the blame to outside factors. The crisis frame, common to all institutions, seems to be problematic, although politically understandable, in the depiction of the refugees. The narrative it builds is quite negative for the refugees as they are shown in terms of success or failure of political crisis management.

Another negative depiction was the European solidarity – problem frame. Again, the semantic ecology of this frame in the institutional discourse initiated
a blame game against who has the ultimate authority and capacity to manage the crisis situation effectively. The regional institutions blamed the central government and the European Union for not supporting the situation. This also was a dehumanizing depiction of the refugees as they were treated as objects depending on foreign decisions.

Another aspect of the political communication used by the institutions was the terminology for the description of the inflows. The terms “migrants” and “refugees” were used interchangeably. In some cases, the latter was used in connection with the word “crisis”. A “refugee crisis” and the “migration problem” highlight the way the institutions depicted the issues. The first was seen in terms of a crisis in the Middle East and a result of the Syrian war. This depiction hid a kind of solidarity and sympathy for the victims. However, migration was seen as a problem. Through this depiction, migration is implied to be an unnecessary situation that burdens the crisis-stricken country. Whereas refugees do not have a choice, migrants could have.

In either case, however, both depictions are dehumanizing and undermine the difficulties and sympathy for those people. The public administration institutions, however, tried to minimize their responsibility for the handling of the situation and those frames practically shifted the blame to outside factors like the situation itself, the war in the Middle East, and the European Union.

The political-institutional discourse is quite understudied as the usual focus of the research in the field are political elites. Nevertheless, as the paper shows, a study in the regional institutions provides a clearer image of how representations of the political and media environment have been either reproduced or produced in the first place. The actual contribution of the study is to show how the local political environment framed the unprecedented situation and how they depicted the inflows. Therefore, this paper contributes to this discussion and illuminates institutional speech. Limitations, however, apply as this is a very focused study and therefore cannot be generalized. Further research may focus on the political elites of that time and perhaps on the political parties to find clear differentiations or similarities and gain an overall picture of the depiction of refugees and migrants in the Greek media-political environment.

Aspriadis Neofytos. I am currently an adjunct lecturer of Communication at the Department of History and Archaeology of the University of Patras. Also, I am a research affiliate at the Center for Information, Technology and Public Life of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I worked in the past as a visiting research fellow at the Department of Political Science and International Relations of the University of Peloponnese conducting research on Strategic Communication in International Crises with a focus on domestic home front management. I got my Ph.D. with a scholarship from the State Scholarship Foundation of Greece (IKY) from the Department of International and European Studies of the University of Piraeus. My research interests are in strategic communication, crisis communications, public diplomacy, information warfare, psychological operations, fake news, disinformation, character assassination, and rhetoric.
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