

## Rafal Zaborowski and Myria Georgiou Refugee 'crisis'? Try 'crisis in the European press'

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# Refugee 'crisis'? Try 'crisis in the European press'

[opendemocracy.net/rafal-zaborowski-myria-georgiou/refugee-crisis-try-crisis-in-european-press](https://www.opendemocracy.net/rafal-zaborowski-myria-georgiou/refugee-crisis-try-crisis-in-european-press)

Rafal Zaborowski and Myria Georgiou

A new study finds some disturbing trends in the European press coverage of refugees and the purported consequences of their arrival.



*Refugees and migrants, mostly from Afghanistan, walk towards a transit centre on the Macedonian border in February 2016. Boris Grdanoski/Press Association. All rights reserved.*

While it is now more common for “the refugee crisis” to be referred to in the media as last year’s affair, 2016 has been the deadliest year for refugees trying to reach Europe by sea. Only the recorded deaths in the Mediterranean present a chilling reality – and yet, this reality rarely makes headlines. Has journalism forgotten its mission? Has the public grown numb? When does crisis become a crisis? Our cross-European study of the press in 2015 sets the stage to engage with these questions and reveals a political and ethical predicament that touches upon the core values of Europe.

Our research of broadsheet press in eight European countries in the east and the west of the continent analysed 1200 stories on the “refugee crisis” unfolding in the period immediately after three key events in 2015: European leaders agreeing on refugee quotas in July; the publication of images of Alan Kurdi’s tragic drowning in September; and the Paris terrorist attacks in November. The narratives we recorded were rich and revealed a complex picture that had temporal, ideological, and geographical particularities and differences in the coverage of the crisis.

European press discourses surrounding the crisis were dominated by stories of human tragedy and sea travel; decisions made at national and European levels to keep people in or out; and speculations on how both could affect ‘us’ – national citizens, thoughtful Europeans, concerned hosts. Yet, in the diversity of the coverage we saw the initially ambivalent and eventually strong reaffirmation of a securitisation regime underlying Europe’s press response to the new arrivals. Europe’s attention, let alone its empathy and solidarity, was inevitably and predictably ephemeral.

## Helping refugees, protecting Europe

Analysing press articles, we distinguished between mentions of *humanitarian* measures to help the refugees (providing shelter, donating, opening borders, help with registration, etc.) and *securitisation* measures to protect the country/Europe (sending refugees back, closing borders, building physical obstacles, upping police presence, etc.). The frequency of both sets changed across editorial stances, time periods and geographical

locations. The left and centre-left press emphasised humanitarian measures much more than right and centre-right outlets.

There has been a shift from emotional, humane narratives surrounding the refugees and national citizens to a distant, emotionless framing – a policy affair of action and reaction.

Articles in July and September featured sympathy towards the refugee plight and emphasised actions to assist asylum seekers, while in November over 60% of the stories mentioned defensive and militaristic actions. Interestingly, the press in 'western' countries in the study was characterised by narratives of securitisation and the press in 'eastern' countries focused on actions to help the refugees. These trends are significant, because they show the relevance of both general (cross-European events) and contextual (national and regional specificities) factors in shaping the narrative.

Generally, though, we observed a consistent move from humanitarianism towards securitisation. Despite a short, hopeful period of increased reporting on humanitarian measures in September (72%, compared to 55% in July and 48% in November), the militaristic frame was on the steady rise, from 45% in July, 47% in September and 61% in November). Furthermore, the peak of the 'refugee/migration crisis' saw a gradual shift in emotional media narratives. Articles after the Paris terrorist attacks reported significantly fewer citizen emotions or refugee emotions than stories in July or September. This clearly underlines a move from emotional, humane narratives surrounding the refugees and national citizens to a distant, emotionless framing – a policy affair of action and reaction.

## **Truth or consequences**

To a reader of newspapers, it is perhaps unsurprising that negative consequences of refugee arrivals featured in as much as two-thirds of all stories in the sample. Coupled with the fact that 59% of all articles mentioned no positive consequences, this narrative of anxiety is troubling. The focus on projected negative outcomes – in a situation when no empirically-based, causal relationship has been established between the plight of migrants and the wellbeing of European countries – has been crucial in shaping the discourse of gloom and fear.

A more detailed look paints an even more unsettling picture. While negative consequences in the press were mostly geopolitical, economic or cultural in nature, positive consequences (when present at all) were framed predominantly as a moral imperative of empathy. The emerging narrative, then, strongly links negative consequences to 'real', tangible developments in European countries, while very few positive aspects go beyond moral obligations.

Comparing the data across three periods in 2015 helps understand the fluidity of those narratives. Economic and cultural consequences dominate in July and September, but in November, Paris attacks push the discourse towards terror threats and the number of geopolitical consequences mentioned almost triples. Driven by the media narrative of fear, in a span of two months, refugees' representation in the press shifts rapidly from a collage of pitiful individuals and economic opportunists to a frame of geopolitical dangers the refugees bring to Europe.

## **Spoken for, spoken about**

Although much was said for and about the refugees in the European press, their descriptions were highly limited in scope. Refugees were predominantly described as nationals of a country (62% of articles in the sample). Only 24% of articles distinguished between men and women, just over a quarter described their age or age group, only 16% of articles included the names of refugees and as little as 7% included their professions.

The emerging narrative strongly links negative consequences to 'real', tangible developments in European countries, while very few positive aspects go beyond moral obligations.

Refugees thus emerge from these narratives as an anonymous, unskilled group with uncertain goals (over 37% of the articles give no reasons behind refugee arrivals). They are 'the other' to the presumed reader of the press

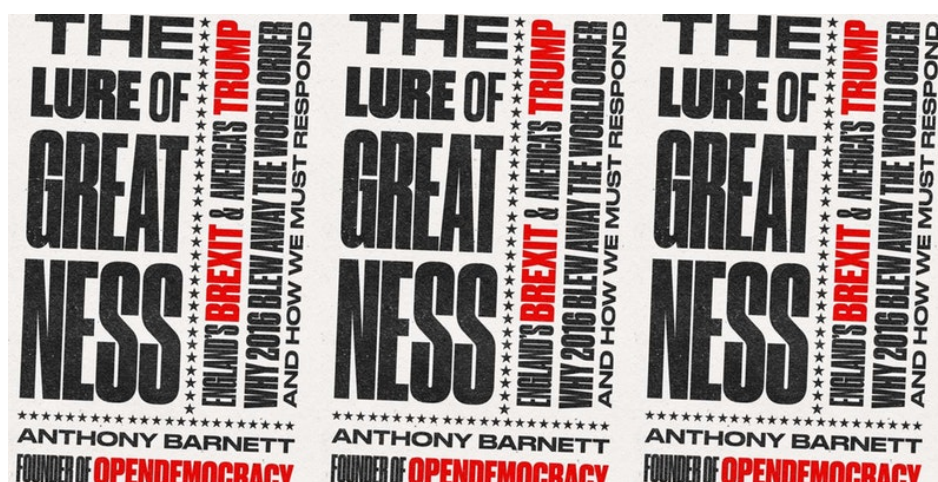
and this limited characterisation shapes the discourse surrounding the crisis for both European audiences and stakeholders. In the mediated narrative, without individual characteristics, refugees are implied to be of little use for European countries (as they seem to have no profession), inspiring little empathy (because they are dehumanised and de-individualised) and raising suspicion (because no gender distinction aids the narrative of refugees being “**mostly young men chancing their luck**”).

Furthermore, in the analysed sample, opinions of refugees were rarely represented. Refugee voices (featuring in 16% of the articles) remained in minority compared to those who were allowed to speak, most notably national or European government representatives (66%). National citizen voices were included even less (6%). These results remain similar across time (despite a small spike in the inclusion of refugee voices in September) or geographical proximity to incoming refugees. Despite much press talk about the refugees and their reasons, and despite a significant emphasis on the consequences for European citizens, neither of these groups was allowed to speak for themselves in the articles. Instead, their actions and emotions were represented and validated by the (western) officials in charge.

This all leads to problematic signals coming from the media, whose vulnerability and lack of resources become particularly evident in coverage of complex stories like this. A lack of context given to the refugee plight, low diversity of standpoints, and little mention of wider historical circumstances behind 'the crisis' result in simplistic framing: us versus them, the good versus the bad, refugees worthy of saving versus sneaky/dangerous migrants. Finally, no voice given to refugees or even citizens makes it impossible to develop a sense of togetherness or solidarity in Europe. The 'refugee crisis' label is controversial, but there is no doubt we are experiencing a crisis of journalism and ethics.

**Correction [13 May 2017]:** The sentence beginning: "Only 24% of articles distinguished between men and women..." originally put the proportion at "35%", and was changed at the request of the authors.

*The project is co-led by Lilie Chouliaraki, Myria Georgiou and Rafal Zaborowski. The conceptual framework for the analysis was developed by Lilie Chouliaraki and Myria Georgiou. Thank you to Dr Ellen Helsper and our colleagues and coders without whom the project would not be possible: Zuzana Brezinová, Leah Selig Chauhan, Antonios Dimitriadis, Joelle Eid, Lisa Elkhoury, Poliana Geha, Shreya Goenka, Safaa Halahla, Róbert Hegedűs, Gyorgyi Horvath, Seema Huneidi, Rosanna Hutchings, Leticia Ishibashi-Poppenwimmer, Götz Kadow, Kaylah Kleczka, Kristina Kolbe, Afroditi Koulaxi, Jan Krotký, Ana Lomtadze, Tze Ming Mok, Rita Nemeth, Sadichchha Pokharel, Corinne Schweizer, Karim Shukr, Ema Stastna, Tijana Stolic, Sanja Vico, Pauline Vidal, Felicity Ward.*



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