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# THE REFUGEE CRISIS' DOUBLE STANDARDS: MEDIA FRAMING AND THE PROLIFERATION OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE NARRATIVES DURING THE UKRAINIAN AND SYRIAN CRISES

**Matías Ibañez Sales**

Programme and Research Officer, Department of Sustainable Development and Regional Integration, European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), Barcelona

## Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has triggered one of the largest refugee movements that Europe has witnessed since the end of the Second World War. According to the European Union (EU), the estimated number of displaced people from Ukraine who have benefited from the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) ranges between 4 to 5 million (Council of the European Union, 2023), yet the total number of displaced people by the overall crisis skyrockets up to 8 million (UNHCR, 2023).

It was not so long ago that European shores faced another humanitarian catastrophe when thousands of Syrian people were forced to flee their country escaping from the war and the generalised crisis situation. By the end of 2016, over 5 million refugees and asylum seekers reached European countries, the majority of which came from Syria, but there also were Afghans, Iraqis and Eritreans among them (UNHCR, 2021). Nevertheless, today just over 1 million Syrians have successfully been granted international protection in the EU since the onset of the Syrian crisis (UNHCR, 2021).

Despite the differences in the total number of people arriving at EU borders from Ukraine and Syria, positive-centred media framing of the Ukrainian crisis has had an impact in mobilising

citizen and political action in favour of welcoming Ukrainian refugees, contrary to what happened in 2015 with the Syrian refugee drama (Reilly & Flynn, 2022). The proliferation of positive narratives by European media newsrooms in the first days of the crisis helped create a discursive and narrative context favourable to the need to protect and host Ukrainian displaced people. This initial playing field, along with other geopolitical, historical and cultural variables that have also been present in the policy-making equation, was conducive to the EU taking different political decisions from seven years ago, i.e., the activation of the most beneficial reception and protection mechanism for refugees in the history of the EU.

According to different literature, the media can play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and influencing policy-making cycles in crisis-related scenarios such as the Ukrainian-Russian conflict and its subsequent refugee crisis (Eberl et al., 2018). The media can be crucial in advocating and influencing policy actions (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993), and this bureaucratic affinity between media, policy-makers and audience (Fishman, 1980) also gives journalism the power to push forward the public agenda through the constant coverage of certain issues and the creation of differentiated narratives for or against a certain situation (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017).

The aim of this paper is to assess the role of the media in fostering differentiated policy responses to the Ukrainian and Syrian refugee crises by spreading positive and negative narratives. Concrete examples of differentiated media treatment and framing on Ukrainian and Syrian refugees based on double standards will be described, and comparisons will be made between the EU temporary protection and asylum mechanisms activated in the framework of the two refugee crises. Finally, a series of recommendations addressed to the European Commission (EC) and media newsrooms will reflect on possible action points to seize the potential of the newly-activated TPD while mitigating double standards on media coverage and discrimination on policy decisions.

## **A look into the role of the media in shaping public opinion and policy responses in the context of refugee crises**

In migration-media studies, and in particular in the aftermath of the Syrian refugee crisis, extensive literature has investigated the role of the media in shaping public opinion and policy decisions in the context of humanitarian crises, the representation of refugees in the press, and the power of the media in framing narratives in refugee crisis-related contexts. To contextualise, a *frame* can be seen as a scheme of interpretation that endorses a particular problem definition or causal interpretation of an issue (Entman, 1993). In this vein, media framing is the process by which the media places the events reported in a certain perspective or frame, selecting specific aspects of a perceived reality media and acting as gatekeeper on how the news is presented (Scheufele, 1999; Pérez, 2017).

Thus, the tone and form of news coverage is particularly important as it can provide media audiences with certain tools to understand and depict the situation, and thereby can influence further public opinion and policy decisions (Eberl et al., 2018; Valentino et al., 2001). In this context, media coverage plays a key role in framing certain crises in a particular way, highlighting specific aspects of the situation, downplaying or ignoring others, while contributing to the creation of specific positive and negative narratives (Xu, 2021). Negativity or positivity in media coverage has been shown to influence people's perception of the issue, especially in migration-related news coverage (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009). Thus, this initial media framing and narrative proliferation can have a key role on how the public perceives the crisis and what solutions they consider appropriate, while policy-makers may be influenced by media coverage and public opinion when making decisions about how to address the crisis (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017; Heidenreich et al., 2019). The climate of

uncertainty usually leaves ample room for traditional media to first shape citizens' understanding of what the arrival of these refugees will likely suppose for their respective country (Heidenreich et al., 2019). For example, if media coverage consistently portrays refugees as a threat to national security (security frame), as occurred with the Syrian refugee crisis, public opinion and policy-makers may be more likely to prioritise border security measures over humanitarian assistance (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Krzyżanowski et al., 2018). Conversely, if media coverage highlights the human stories and suffering of refugees, as has been the case of the Ukrainian refugee crisis, policy-makers may be more inclined to focus on providing humanitarian aid and offering asylum to those in need (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017; Eberl et al., 2018).

## **The proliferation of positive narratives towards Ukrainian refugees: media-fuelled double standards and discriminatory messages**

Among European media channels, some commentators, journalists and reporters were severely criticised at the beginning of the conflict for using discriminatory language and making offensive comments based on the comparisons of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in the way they dress, pray, eat or speak (AMEJA, 2022). Through their coverage of the Ukrainian crisis, the media helped perpetuate the idea that refugees fleeing European soil deserved better treatment than other refugees who have fled from other parts of the world. The majority of these types of messages appeared on the first days of the invasion both on TV and in newspapers, and were quickly shared on social media such as Twitter or YouTube.

For instance, Daniel Hannan, British reporter from *The Telegraph*, wrote in an opinion article on 26 February "They seem so like us. That is what makes it so shocking. War is no longer something visited upon impoverished and remote populations. It can happen to anyone" (Hannan, 2022). Moreover, Charlie D'Agata, a senior CBS correspondent in Kyiv, stated on air "This isn't a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan, that has seen conflict raging for decades. You know, this is a relatively civilised, relatively European – I have to choose those words carefully, too – city, where you wouldn't expect that or hope that it's going to happen" (Bayoumi, 2022).

In this very same line, Phillipe Corbé, a commentator at the French BFM TV, stated that "we're not talking about Syrians fleeing bombs of the Syrian regime backed by Putin, we're talking about Europeans leaving in cars that look like ours to save their lives" (Ellison & Andrews, 2022). Al-Jazeera commentator Peter Dobbie referred to the way Ukrainians were dressed or looked, such as "Looking at them, the way they are dressed, these are prosperous... I'm loath to use the expression ... middle-class people. These are not obviously refugees looking to get away from areas in the Middle East that are still in a big state of war. These are not people trying to get away from areas in North Africa. They look like anyone" (Bayoumi, 2022). Last but not least, Kelly Kobiella, a reporter for NBC News covering the refugee drama from Poland, mentioned in prime time: "Just to put it bluntly, these are not refugees from Syria. These are Christians or white" (Arab News, 2022).

Through this dehumanising comparison, media coverage gradually helped push and frame a positive narrative on the need to protect Ukrainian refugees because they were similar to Europeans, behaved like Europeans, and had cultural and democratic values close to those of Europeans. This humanitarian media framing and positive narratives circulated at the beginning of the crisis and claimed the necessary reception of refugees fleeing the horror of the Putin-initiated war and encouraged the idea of help and protecting our fellow Ukrainian neighbours. Echoing the motto "refugees welcome", radio and television shows portrayed the war with a special focus on the humanitarian drama, giving a voice and a face to vulnerable people fleeing the horror. Repeated images and stories about mobilised citizens at the

Ukrainian borders handing out water, food, clothing, blankets and medicines monopolised our TV screens for some months at the beginning of the invasion. Regrettably, this positive narrative was developed upon pillars of discriminatory comparisons with refugees from different origins, races or cultures, especially from North Africa and the Middle East, and, therefore, fostered on prime time TV double standards in the way they are treated.

## **A look into the differentiated treatment**

### **Cultural biases and Orientalist stereotypes: the Ukrainian and Syrian refugee crises**

These are just a few of many examples of offensive comparisons that were made at the beginning of the crisis, which clearly shows the biases and stereotypes perpetuated through the media. Positive narratives were created based on the pretext that Ukrainians are educated people and look like Europeans. According to Denijal Jegic, researcher at the American University of Beirut, these few examples show the Orientalist philosophy, which was present in the 20th century colonial discourse, as these types of narratives implicitly suggest that war is a natural phenomenon in places outside of the Western world and portrays a lack of civilisation (Ellison & Andrews, 2022).

Against this scenario of proliferation of Orientalist-explicit biases, the Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists Association (AMEJA) issued a statement in February 2022 calling on media newsrooms across Europe to put an end to these types of narratives and reflections, and to be mindful of implicit and explicit bias in their coverage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022). Bestselling author Moustapha Baoyoumi, in a famous article written for *The Guardian* newspaper in March 2022, claimed a similar idea, i.e., that “this kind of slanted and racist media coverage extends beyond our screens and newspapers and easily bleeds and blends into our politics” (2022).

In the same line, Philip Seib, professor and author of *Information at War: Journalism, Disinformation, and Modern Warfare*, explained in an interview for The Washington Post that these double standards in international coverage will become less prominent over time as newsrooms diversify and hire employees from different backgrounds, origins, cultures, and religions (Ellison & Andrews, 2022). Professor Serena Parekh pointed out in an interview for Al-Jazeera that today’s mainstream Western media and newsrooms are mostly represented by white people, lacking diversity and perspective (Khalid, 2022). As a result, stereotypes are perpetuated and reproduced in negative narratives that foster xenophobia and double standards of differentiated treatment. In this same line, and according to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2017), journalism must not pursue the truth in an absolute or philosophical sense, but seek a journalistic truth, i.e., to depict accurate facts and put them in a meaningful context to inform society. However, it is important to remark that this journalistic truth presented by media production does not mean journalists are impartial or neutral. As White (1950) argues, journalists are human beings who are not free from the cognitive and cultural biases of taking decisions, and, thus, tend to seek and portray information in ways that confirm their initial beliefs through processes of matching real events to stored media wires categories (Stocking & Gross, 1989). Thus, to avoid double standards and Western-centric approaches, journalism should be more open to newsroom diversity, including different voices from different cultural backgrounds, and the professional ideology of journalists will always encompass the perceptions of public service, objectivity, autonomy, respect, ethics and transparency on new wires production (Deuze, 2005).

Moreover, this Orientalist approach that portrays Ukrainian people as “civilised” and the Syrian refugees as “terrorists” or “problematic”, paves the way to treat them politically different, while

reflecting a poor understanding of the situation (Khalid, 2022). Disinformation, misinformation and xenophobia played a key role in creating mainstream negative narratives on the reception of Syrian and other non-European asylum seekers back in 2015-2016, contrary to what happened in 2022 with the Ukrainian humanitarian crisis.

According to extensive literature, the dominant frame used in the coverage of the Syrian crisis was security, which portrayed the refugees as a potential threat to national security, while the humanitarian frame, which emphasised the suffering of refugees and the need for assistance, was also present but less dominant (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2018). The European press played a central role in framing refugees' and migrants' arrival on European shores in 2015 as a security threat for Europe (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2018), but also as an economic burden, according to the analysis conducted by Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017) on the European refugee crisis coverage in Austrian newspapers. Moreover, Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017) highlighted after a content analysis of news coverage in eight European countries that the most common arguments used in negatively portraying Syrian refugees were based on geopolitical (terrorism), economic (economic crisis), cultural (antipathy of Islam) or moral (deceit) factors. In this same line, Syrian people were portrayed on prime time TV as a threat to European cultural values and the EU's economic stability. This framing contributed to the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment and policies in many European countries, while the media also contributed to the spread of misinformation and the polarisation of public opinion.

This media framing created negative feelings and perceptions against the arrival of people from the Middle East on European shores, which raised a generalised narrative playing field and the use of double standards of differentiated policy treatment.

### **Other key factors that played a role in shaping media attitudes, public opinion and policy responses to the Ukrainian crisis**

The exact extent to which the media influenced particular EU policy decisions in the context of the Ukrainian crisis is difficult to measure with quantifiable data. This is mainly because other factors such as a common and shared history between Ukraine and EU member states – especially post-Soviet countries –, border cooperation programmes, EU diaspora living in Ukraine and vice versa, cultural similarities, shared cultural and social values, or even security, defence and geopolitical considerations, played a role in the policy planning equation. It is thus very difficult to quantify what weight the positive and negative narratives had in the different policy responses given by European authorities, as it is not a scientific causal relationship.

First, many of the Eastern Europe countries that have welcomed Ukrainian refugees have a Soviet past and felt a moral obligation to help a post-Soviet neighbour such as Ukraine. Moreover, and according to Garcés Mascareñas (2022), geographical and cultural proximity was an obvious variable to take into account, as EU leaders and the media repeatedly pointed out the cultural and social proximity of those arriving at EU borders.

Moreover, since 2017 Ukrainian citizens were able to travel visa-free within the EU for 90 days, which clearly shows that Ukrainians have been crossing the EU borders for long time, and had family and friends on both sides, which makes them “*closer*” to the European citizens who hosted them (Garcés Mascareñas, 2022).

The fear that Russia's invasion might escalate towards neighbouring countries has also contributed to the activation of the largest solidarity response to a humanitarian catastrophe in decades. Moreover, the need to stand up to Putin through the EU's solidarity values was also involved in the policy planning cycle. Thus, while large-scale displacement from Syria

represented a problem back in 2015 and 2016, the Ukrainian crisis was an opportunity to demonstrate the core European values to Russia through an adequate policy response, mainly solidarity but also compassion and empathy.

However, as we have seen in the comparative literature, the symbiotic relationship between media and policy decisions exists and plays a role, especially during a refugee and conflict-related crisis.

## **The media-policy symbiosis in the eyes of the Ukrainian crisis**

### **Words and expressions matter**

Media coverage can influence how policy-makers communicate about a certain crises and issue (Kunelius & Roosval, 2021). A constant coverage of a crisis from a security perspective will lead to policy-makers giving security-related justifications when proposing policy solutions. Similarly, if media coverage emphasises the need for solidarity and compassion, policy-makers may use these values as a basis for their policies (Eberl et al., 2018). All in all, journalism plays a key role in telling a particular side of the story and forming perceptions that the public discourse uses about refugees (Choularaki & Zaboroski, 2017).

In the context of the Ukrainian crisis, the positive “welcoming narratives” shaped the social context to a greater or lesser extent and laid the pillars of a socially accepted language and narrative within the framework of the war. As denounced by Widad Ketfi, French journalist and author of the Bondy Blog, the displaced persons from Ukraine were no longer migrants for the mainstream media in Europe, as Syrian displaced persons were once called, but refugees in need of protection (Ketfi, 2022). Unlike the usual media-fuelled narratives of “refugee invasions” into Europe, and the racist and xenophobic rhetoric about refugees and migrants, in particular those from North Africa, public and media discourse across Europe shifted towards a more inclusive and supportive one (Reilly & Flynn, 2022).

The language used has been essential in gradually shaping the context, approach and focus of the crisis at all levels. The words and expressions used by TV programmes, newspapers and radio, especially in the first days of the invasion, were crucial to create a particular positive narrative towards Ukrainian refugees’ need for protection. This narrative levelled up the right social and political context, which together with other geopolitical, historical and cultural variables as we have described, shaped the EU’s response towards the most comprehensive legal and policy package ever activated to protect Ukrainian refugees.

In this context, EU member states as a whole responded with massive social and political support for refugees, especially in neighbouring countries such as Poland or Hungary, which had an unorthodox hostility against hosting Syrian refugees during the 2015 crisis and recently prevented asylum seekers entering from Belarus. Back in 2016, Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán had described non-European refugees as “Muslim invaders” and had claimed that “Hungary should not accept refugees from different cultures and religions to preserve its cultural and ethnic homogeneity” (Reilly & Flynn, 2022). However, one week after the Russian invasion, President Orbán said the motto “we’re letting everyone in” near the Hungarian-Ukrainian border (Bathke, 2022), while Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov also echoed the media-fuelled discriminatory narrative by underlying that “these people are Europeans. These people are intelligent, they are educated people.... This is not the refugee wave we have been used to, people we were not sure about their identity, people with unclear pasts, who could have been even terrorists...” (Brito, 2022).

### **EU’s policy responses to both humanitarian crises**

EC President Ursula von der Leyen remarked one week into the invasion that “all those fleeing Putin’s bombs are welcome in Europe” (Henley, 2022). These words were followed by the first-ever legal activation of the EU TPD on 4 March 2022, which was approved by the Council

of the EU for the first time in the history of the Union since its inception in 2001 after the Kosovo War. The EU activation of the TPD was a significant step towards a more humane protection regime (Venturi & Vallianatou, 2022), and it sent a clear message of a joint EU commitment to implement a coordinated response to tackle the humanitarian catastrophe of the massive mobilisation of Ukrainian people into European borders (Carrera et al., 2022). Moving away from “fortress Europe” and the robust Dublin asylum system, the TPD allowed the formal lifting of visa requirements and a particular protection status, granting residence permits to Ukrainian beneficiaries up to three years. It also provided harmonised rights across the EU, such as work permit and immediate access to national education and health systems, and housing benefits (Carrera et al., 2022).

While internal disagreements and inaction have characterised the EU's response to the 2015-2016 refugee crisis, the treatment of Ukrainian refugees fleeing the Russian invasion has been the first stone on the road to exemplary behaviour in the eyes of EU and international law. This has been contrary to the negotiated shameful cash-for-returns deal with Turkey to respond to large-scale displacement from Syria.

The TPD has never before been put into practice or activated by the Council of the European Union. This was mainly due to the lack of a member states' common approach on sharing equal responsibility on refugee protection after the so-called Arab Spring and a generalised political blockage on the reformulation of the EU Dublin system (Ineli-Ciger, 2016). Despite numerous requests to the European institutions for its activation in 2016, specially from Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from different political groups (Carrera et al., 2022), the international legality in force on asylum request and refugee protection resulting from the Geneva Conventions was applied to the asylum seekers arriving from Syria. While the TPD's application ensures immediate temporary protection on a collective basis without individual assessment of each asylum request, this was not the situation for Syrian refugees (Garcés Mascareñas, 2022). This means that the asylum requests on an individual basis were made at the borders of EU member states while the asylum-seeking processes ranged from six months to one year to have a response. Also, the TPD allows the territorial distribution of refugees based on their own preferences of residence (Carrera et al., 2022), contrary to what happened with Syrian asylum seekers, who were dependent on the reception preferences of each member state (Garcés Mascareñas, 2022). Moreover, the majority of Syrians were granted subsidiary protection and were entitled to residence and work permit but not to family reunion rights (Carrera et al., 2022).

## Conclusions and recommendations

Russia's invasion took place on 24 February 2022, and the activation of the TPD by unanimity at the Council occurred just one week after the onset of the crisis on 4 March 2022. It took only eight days to activate the most ambitious and generous legislative and policy package on asylum and temporary protection deployed in the history of the EU.

As we have briefly described, media newsrooms act today as creators, distributors and gatekeepers of meaning in society and shape policy decisions, as they define newsworthiness, select frames and portray stories. Their role as shapers of both public opinion and policy-making through the creation of positive or negative narratives and specific media frames has been largely recognised in the literature, especially in the context of humanitarian and refugee crises and conflict-related scenarios.

In our particular case, theory was applied to practice, as media coverage of the crisis at the beginning of the conflict played a significant role in shaping future EU policy decisions, as it helped to first frame the crisis in a particular way and influenced public opinion and policy-makers alike. One of the key ways in which media coverage shaped EU policy decisions was by highlighting the human stories and suffering of refugees. This helped to create a sense of empathy and solidarity among the European public and put pressure on policy-makers to provide humanitarian aid and support to those affected by the crisis. Media coverage also helped to raise awareness of the scale and complexity of the crisis, highlighting the need for a coordinated and comprehensive EU response.

This media framing helped raise the playing field of the public and political discourse to the same levels. Together with other described geographical, historical, political and cultural proximity factors that were also present in the complex equation that defines crisis-related political decision-making, the combination of all these variables gave rise to the right political and social momentum that led to the EU's unanimous policy decision and activation of the TPD. Overall, the media played a complex and multifaceted role in shaping EU policy decisions in the context of the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

## Recommendations for media newsrooms across Europe

- In this respect, fighting disinformation and countering xenophobia, as well as avoiding racist and discriminatory messages, should be a priority for media newsrooms to ensure a fairer coverage of humanitarian catastrophes and crises, especially in the context of refugee-related events. To prevent explicit biases and stereotypes, media newsrooms should train correspondents, reporters and journalists on the cultural and political nuances of the regions and contexts they are reporting on, eliminating Orientalist approaches. Moreover, mainstream media newsrooms should become more diversified and hire commentators and journalists from different backgrounds, origins, cultures and religions. Inaccurate and misleading comparisons based on double standards and negative stereotypes only serve to inflame toxic narratives and perpetuate discriminatory political decisions.
- Civil society, the media industry as a whole, and migration stakeholders should pay greater attention to negative and discriminatory narratives and double standards portrayed by the media towards asylum seekers and combat them by counter-reacting with positive messages and narratives. During the first days of the Russian invasion, a large number of commentators, reporters and journalists went public on social media, TV and newspapers to denounce the media refugee crisis' double standards and to expose these incendiary and discriminatory messages. New and innovative platforms that help fight against xenophobic messages online or identify fake news and misleading information should be further explored and developed by migration and media stakeholders. These types of platforms could act as media watchdogs and expose commentators and journalists publicly when they use discriminatory language.

## Recommendations for EU policy-makers

- The EC should rethink and reformulate existing migration, temporary protection and asylum policies that perpetuate the unequal treatment and double standards towards non-European third country nationals. In this context, the Dublin system should take into account the precedent legal axis deployed with the TPD and incorporate the same harmonised benefits across the EU for upcoming asylum seekers. This situation would help uphold the notion of equal solidarity, and the same legal rights applied to Ukrainian refugees would be applied to future asylum seekers, including residence permits, housing, medical assistance, access to the labour market and education, as well as family reunification. From a human-centred approach, the equal dignity of every person should prevail when designing and implementing migration and asylum policy, while tackling institutionalised forms of discrimination and racism towards non-European asylum seekers and refugees.
- Fighting disinformation and countering xenophobia at the heart of the European institutions is crucial to ensure the future sustainability of the EU refugee protection mechanisms, and to start repairing the discriminatory nature of Europe's approach to asylum. The European institutions should avoid exploiting negative narratives and sensationalistic claims based on prejudices and misconceptions, especially those that are media-fuelled and related to



the discriminatory nature of origin, race or religion of refugees and asylum seekers. As such, it is important for journalists to report ethically and accurately on crises, and for policy-makers to consider a range of perspectives and sources of information when making decisions.

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