

Article

The Refugee Issue in the Greek, German, and British Press During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The media hold an essential role in circulating information, disseminating knowledge, constructing representations, shaping ideologies, and influencing contemporary societies. Since the outburst of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, their attention has been mostly paid to the protection and the health situation of citizens worldwide. Although millions of refugees are also exposed to a new risk with their vulnerable position being deteriorated, the refugee issue in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have been downgraded. In this regard, the current article explores to what extent the refugee issue was salient in the Greek, German, and British press during the pandemic. At the same time, it looks at how the media outlets in all three countries addressed it, focusing on the key topics reported and the interpretive schemata of the pertinent coverage. We use a qualitative content analysis, examining a sample of newspaper articles that were published between 1 January 2021 and 1 May 2021. The results presented by this article suggest that the epidemiological developments or other health aspects related to local populations seem to overshadow the situation of refugees. Yet, media outlets mostly perceive refugees as victims of the pandemic, underlining their vulnerability and marginalisation in health, economic, and education terms. The findings seek to feed the public discussion, providing a fruitful approach to the media narratives and representations of refugees during the Covid-19 crisis.

Keywords

Covid-19; frame analysis; media discourse; media representations; pandemic; refugees

Issue

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1. Introduction: Conceptual and Methodological Framework

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to an unparalleled health crisis, exerting dramatic pressure on the public health care systems and societies worldwide and driving global economy to a major recession (International Labour Organization et al., 2020; OECD, 2020). Meanwhile, when an infectious disease emerges, not everyone

is affected the same way, and Covid-19 is not an exception (Edmonds & Flahault, 2021). Social inequality and exclusion have been exacerbated, while the most marginalised and vulnerable populations in society have faced disproportionate hardships when it comes to access to healthcare (Shomron, 2021).

Refugees constitute one of the most vulnerable population groups (Mouzourakis et al., 2017), being exposed to a new risk due to Covid-19, especially those among

them who live in densely populated centres or camps, many of which with inadequate health and sanitation infrastructure face insurmountable obstacles when it comes to physical distancing, access to face masks, public health services, clean water and soap, among others (UNHCR, 2021a). Yet, reporting by mainstream media outlets across Europe on refugees and migrants is considered marginal (European Commission, 2021).

The media hold an essential role in circulating information, disseminating knowledge, constructing representations, shaping ideologies, and influencing contemporary societies (e.g., de Vreese et al., 2010; Fairclough, 2010; Walter, 2017). In fact, the salience of media coverage and news framing on migration exerts influence on associated attitudes and perceptions as well as on voting behaviour (Jacobs & Hooghe, 2015; Koopmans, 1996). According to van Dijk (2000), media propagate stereotypes, prejudices, and eventually racism. Not only does this create an unfavourable condition for the reception of refugees, but it also hardens societal integration in a medium and long-term perspective (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017).

This article explores to what extent the refugee issue is salient in the Greek, German, and British press during the pandemic (RQ1). For the purposes of this article, we understand salience of the refugee issue in times of Covid-19 to be the number of articles attributed to refugees in conjunction with the references to the pandemic. Put differently, how much coverage refugees received from media outlets, when it comes to the situation they live in or the challenges they experience in the face of the pandemic. The wording “refugee issue” is used to refer to the humanitarian emergency of what has become known as the “refugee crisis.” Since the outbreak of the Covid-19, media outlets’ attention has been mostly paid to the protection and the health situation of citizens worldwide (Pearman et al., 2021). Although millions of refugees are also exposed to a new risk with their vulnerable position being deteriorated, the refugee issue seems to have been downgraded in European media agendas.

At the same time, we look at how the media outlets in all three countries addressed it, focusing on the main frames and the interpretive schemata of the pertinent coverage (RQ2). The article aims to both identify how the sampled newspapers in the aforementioned countries perceive the refugees during the pandemic and provide a preliminary analysis of the (sub-)frames used by journalists when reporting on the issue. The article does not entail a large-scale analysis of the media coverage of the refugee issue as a whole. Rather, it focuses on refugee news that mention Covid-19, delving into six broadsheets, three tabloids, and three regional newspapers from Germany, Greece, and the UK. In this regard, it is sought to feed both the public discussion and social dialogue, providing a fruitful approach to the media narratives and representations of refugees used in relation to the Covid-19 crisis.

In Section 2 of the article, we discuss extant research on the most relevant content-based findings on the refugee issue. First, we provide a non-exhaustive overview of research on the salience of refugees in media outlets across Europe. After that, we refer to the key findings of the literature on news framing. Section 3 of the study refers to the methodology. Section 4 presents and analyses data, processing them in a quantitative way while applying qualitative frame analysis. We searched online databases for refugee and Covid-19 related articles, applying a Boolean string in German, Greek, and English language. We address the question of visibility, exploring over a period the number of articles reported generally on the pandemic itself and the proportion of news items that mentioned Covid-19 in conjunction with the refugee issue. Last but not least, we present the main topics of the media coverage on refugees and the interpretive schemata used by journalists.

2. Immigrants and Refugees in the News

2.1. Salience and Framing

The media coverage of refugees and migrants in terms of both salience and framing has attracted considerable attention from several scholars. Extant research in salience focused on the absolute share or relative number of media reports referring to migration or certain migrant groups (Eberl et al., 2018). It concerned the amount (e.g., Akkerman, 2011) or level of intensity (e.g., Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009) of news stories on migration, which were likely to be dictated by the general political agenda, such as elections or other real-world events (Triandafyllidou, 2017). In this regard, in times of terrorist attacks, reporting on migration seems to have been intensified (Jacobs et al., 2018).

In the UK, there seems to be an increase in newspapers’ coverage related to migration since the election of the Cameron–Clegg coalition government in 2010 (Allen, 2016). In recent years, the increasing number of refugees’ arrivals to Europe has led to a surge in the salience of the migration-related discussion all over the EU (Knight, 2017). The frequency of migration-related news has been positively correlated with the likelihood of voting for right-wing populist parties (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009). Both Golden Dawn in Greece and Alternative for Germany (AfD) seemed to have gained votes in national election contests when there was a reported increase of refugees’ arrivals (Dostal, 2017; Steinmayr, 2017; Vasilakis, 2017). While most migrant groups were underrepresented in the media and the public sphere, in particular before the so-called “refugee crisis,” it was shown that the most visible group in news coverage tended to be the refugees or asylum seekers (Eberl et al., 2018; Strömbäck et al., 2017).

When it comes to news framing, most scholars have explored the valence of economic, social, cultural, or security frames vis-à-vis migration, reflecting and

analysing several aspects of the issue itself (Heidenreich et al., 2019). For instance, the British and Canadian press have portrayed migrants as a security or an economic threat in the past (Balch & Balabanova, 2014; Lawlor & Tolley, 2017). Gabrielatos and Baker (2008) also record negative representations of migrants within the UK’s media outlets. The verbs “fleeing, sneaking, and flooding” are between the most frequently employed (Baker et al., 2008). Another similar repertoire of refugees that has appeared frequently in the British and Australian press is that of “unwanted invader” (Parker, 2015, p. 5). In a study on German media, Cinalli et al. (2021) show that certain news outlets, in particular the tabloid *Bild Zeitung*, were negatively biased towards migrants.

The same study shows that, over time, Danish newspapers have increasingly become more critical in their reporting on immigration, unlike Swedish outlets that have used victim-frames (Cinalli et al., 2021). In Austria, administrative aspects related to the arrivals and narratives of security threat and economic burden are more prominent than humanitarian viewpoints and background information on the condition of refugees (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017). In a seminal article, Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017) find that the reporting within eight European countries is also negatively biased towards refugees, as the media outlets of the sample correlated terrorism, economic crisis, and antipathy of Islam to them. Thus, Esses et al. (2013) speak about dehumanising media coverage that considers refugees potential threats to the host societies.

Elsewhere, refugees and migrants are portrayed as “an undistinguishable group of anonymous and unskilled outsiders who are either vulnerable or dangerous” (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017, p. 22). Thus, some studies reach fewer negative conclusions on the issue, considering refugees “persons in need” (e.g., Kluknavská et al., 2019). They identify stories reported by media outlets through a more humanitarian approach (McAuliffe et al., 2017). Refugees are perceived “as victims of the civil war in Syria, helpless and desperate,” with media outlets focusing, inter alia, on “the tragic issue of child refugees” (Fotopoulos & Kaimaklioti, 2016, p. 276).

2.2. The Covid-19 Pandemic

Although much ink has been spilled on the refugee crisis since 2015, there is only a low number of studies

researching and analysing the issue in times of Covid-19. In fact, a recent study demonstrates that the references of Turkish news media are largely scarce during the pandemic (Yücel, 2021). In Israel, there are references talking of a dichotomy between migrants as a threat to security and migrants in danger (Shomron, 2021). Media outlets identify the challenges they face, but they also symbolically annihilate them, representing migrants and refugees as diseases carriers and spreaders that do not adhere to health protocols and regulations. Besides, it is not the first time that they have been blamed for being a considerable threat to public health. On some occasions, they have been considered responsible for spreading infectious diseases, cancer, and “polluting the air” (Esses et al., 2013; Mahmoud & Al Atrash, 2021). In contrast, issues related to migration received much attention in the Indian press during the confinement (Raj et al., 2021). Reporting is attributed to the migrants’ situation, including availability of food and shelter and the government’s initiatives and public support.

3. Research Design and Methods

The empirical research applies a cross-national approach, exploring three national cases, namely Germany, Greece, and the UK, between 1 January 2021 and 1 May 2021 (see Table 1). We selected the print and online editions of two mainstream newspapers, a regional one, and a tabloid from each of the countries mentioned above to explore to what extent the refugee issue was salient during the pandemic (factual news items, editorials, and op-eds). Subsequently, we analysed the media items’ content. More concretely, we looked at the most mentioned topics and the most eminent frames.

We focused on single news articles as the units of analysis. If there were conflicting frames, we still considered and coded the most prominent one. Having identified the main applied frames and explored the raw textual data, we secondly defined the sub-frames that were mostly used.

The selection served the purpose of covering countries of different geographical regions (EU North–South). Another feature that leads to the selection is the fact that Greece is a first country of asylum (first entry point), with Germany hosting one of the highest numbers of refugees of any country worldwide (UNHCR, 2021b). The particular country selection also includes different types

Table 1. The media outlets of the sample.

Countries	Type			
	Centre-right	Centre-left	Tabloid	Regional
Germany	<i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</i>	<i>Süddeutsche Zeitung</i>	<i>Bild Zeitung</i>	<i>Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung</i>
Greece	<i>I Kathimerini</i>	<i>Efimerida ton Syntakton</i>	<i>Proto Thema</i>	<i>Peloponnisos</i>
UK	<i>The Telegraph</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>Daily Mail</i>	<i>London Evening Standard</i>

of traditional media systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Greece's media system belongs to the polarised pluralist model; in Germany, a democratic-corporatist media system can be observed, while the UK has a liberal model. In this context, the study achieves generalisability. Existing research claims that different types of media systems across countries might result in a variation in the levels of news content diversity (Esser & Umbricht, 2013). We test this variable in an exploratory and moderate way without necessarily having robust theoretical expectations that it will have a catalytic impact on the newspapers' coverage about Covid-19 and refugees.

Turning to the selection of the news outlets, it features multiple dimensions: ideological leaning (centre-right/centre-left), distribution (national/regional), and readership (broadsheet/tabloid). In this regard, we entail various political, ideological, linguistic, and geographical variables, testing in a comparative way whether these generate different perspectives on the issue under discussion. The decision on the classification of the newspapers' political affiliation is based on authors' judgement and methodological categorisations conducted by similar research in the past (Boukala & Dimitrakopoulou, 2017; Salgado & Nienstedt, 2016).

For the most part of the period of the analysis, the countries of our sample experienced a large spike in Covid-19 infections and imposed lockdowns to reduce transmission. In addition to the outbreaks/epidemics, in winter 2021, the countries received the first batches of Covid-19 jabs, rolling out their vaccination programmes. The relevant discussion on media revolved around these issues.

Applying a Boolean string in German, Greek, and English language, we collected data on the refugee issue and Covid-19 through electronic copies (Factiva and through individual subscriptions) or newspapers' hardcopies. Factiva constitutes a tool of research and business information, which aggregates content from both licensed and free sources, and combines over 32,000 sources to provide its users access to premium content from 200 countries in 28 languages.

We compared the number of these articles to the overall news items about the pandemic itself. While the study processes the data in a quantitative way to identify the amount of the pertinent coverage, it applies qualitative frame analysis to capture the way journalists portrayed the discussion around the refugee issue and the pandemic.

A frame is an interpretative scheme, providing meaning to entities, objects, and situations (Van De Steeg & Risse, 2010). Frame analysis unfolds the main arguments/interpretive schemata on a given issue, showing whether they converge or diverge. It also gives information regarding their simultaneity (Pfetsch & Heft, 2015). The authors of the study coded the frames of reference, interpretative schemata, and meaning structures in a comparative typology. In shorthand, a judgment is usually contained within the frames. Often, refugees are por-

trayed by the media outlets of the sample as victims (frame), living in overcrowded centres with poor health and sanitation infrastructure (sub-frame). The frames consist of catchphrases, metaphors, stereotypes, latent messages, etc. (Van Gorp, 2005). Van Gorp (2005), focusing on Belgian newspapers about the asylum issue, notices that both an "intruder" and a "victim" frame is applied by the press. Similarly, Benson (2009, p. 408) measuring frame diversity in migration-related news in France and the US, identifies 10 frame categories, including portrayals as victims, heroes, and a threat.

The coding was performed jointly by the three researchers, adopting a qualitative approach. The coding scheme was developed both inductively and deductively. First of all, based on extant research on frames/viewpoints regarding migration (e.g., Benson, 2013; Masini & Van Aelst, 2017), we distinguished between three types of distinct viewpoints that are used to characterise migrants in the reporting:

- Negative viewpoints: Characterisations of refugees and/or view of them as a threat (e.g., they pose a health danger).
- Victims' viewpoints: Migrants are portrayed as victims (e.g., they lack a decent health and sanitation infrastructure; they are vulnerable and marginalised, facing the risk of not being vaccinated; etc.).
- Positive viewpoints: Characterisations of refugees and/or view of them as an opportunity.

In order to obtain a more fine-grain analysis of how newspapers reported on immigrants in the Covid-19 context, we aimed at generating subcategories of the abovementioned main viewpoints. To this end, we followed an inductive approach, using a constant comparative method for content analysis (Boeije, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As Zhang and Wildemuth (2009, p. 4) put it, "the essence of the constant comparative method is the systematic comparison of each text assigned to a category with each of those already assigned to that category, in order to fully understand the theoretical properties of the category." The scholars argue that this method is not only suitable to create original insights but is also indicated to pinpoint differences among categories. Hence, by using this method, we expected to gain an in-depth understanding of cross-country and cross-media differences in the portrayal of immigrants. As suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), we ensured that subframes were internally homogenous and externally heterogeneous. As the approach to devise the subcategories of viewpoints is inductive, the inferences will be drawn from the coding of the data.

4. Results

The amount of articles dedicated to Covid-19 and refugees was scarce in Germany, Greece, and the UK.

Out of more than 150,000 articles reported on the pandemic, only 225 in total referred to the refugees. Converting this to percentage gives us 0.15%. Despite certain fluctuations across the countries of the sample, variants/mutations and outbreaks/epidemics were by far the most reported subjects related to Covid-19 (Figure 1). Domestic politics and immunisations also turn out to be visible talking points. Certainly, this amount of coverage does not concern procedural actions related to the refugee issue (e.g., relocation), the number of arrivals,

shipwrecks, or rescue operations that were reported throughout this period.

In a more detailed outlook, Figure 2 reflects country- and media-specific variations in the number of attributed articles to the refugee issue in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Pertinent coverage is slightly more prominent in Germany (83 articles) and Greece (79 articles) than in the UK (63 articles). Before elaborating on the results, it is important to note that as Factiva does not entail content from Greek-language

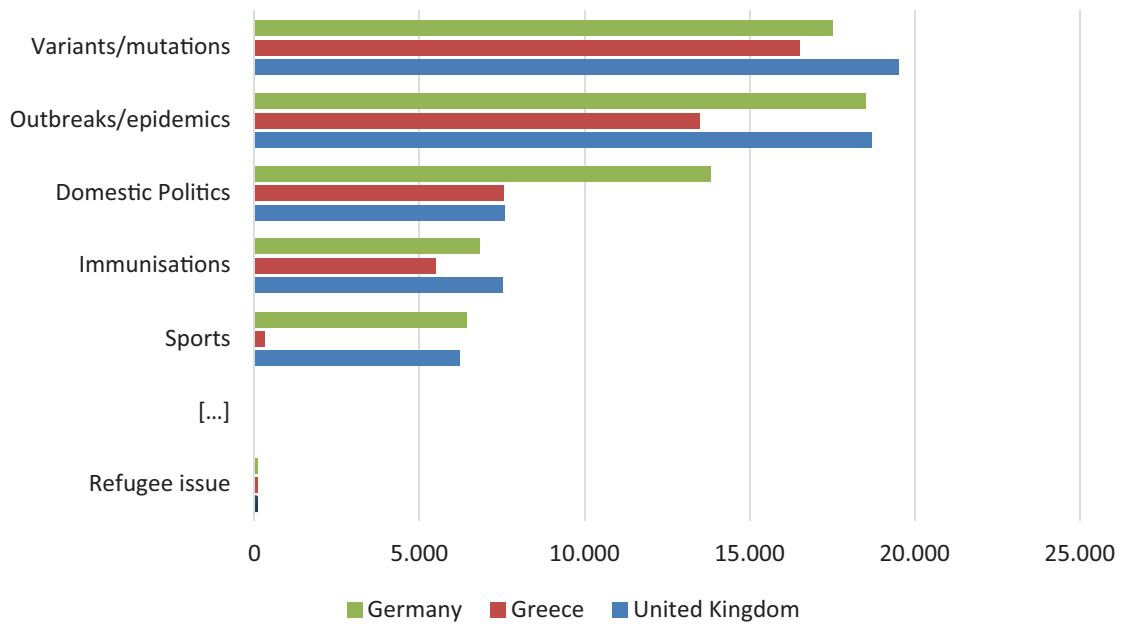


Figure 1. Most mentioned subjects related to Covid-19 (number of articles). Source: Authors’ own compilation through Factiva.

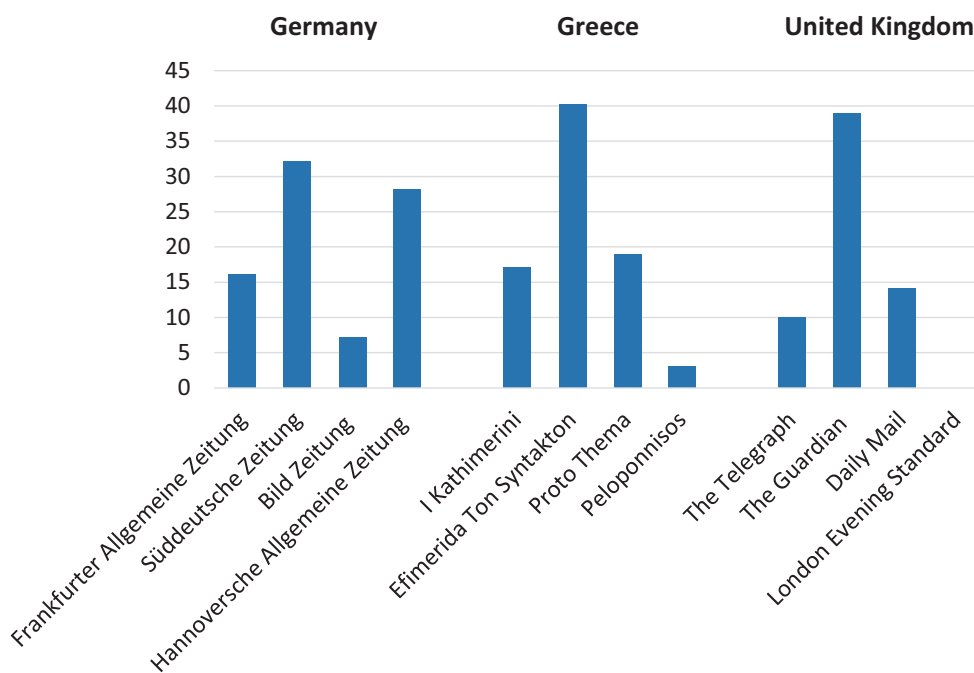


Figure 2. Coverage on the refugee issue and Covid-19.

newspapers and news sites, thus being limited to provide these data, we used the English edition of *Kathimerini* as a proxy. In this media outlet, we identified the ratio of the most mentioned subjects related to Covid-19—variants/mutations (223), outbreaks/epidemics (182), domestic politics (102), immunisations (74), and sports (4)—to the number of articles dedicated to refugees/migrants (1). We then multiplied each number of the figures mentioned above by the overall number of articles referring to refugees (74).

With the exception of Germany, where *Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung* attributes relevantly much coverage to the issue, national presses tend to report more than the regional newspapers do. For example, in the UK, the *London Evening Standard* does not devote any article to the topic. However, the situation could be different if we selected more than one regional newspaper or a newspaper from a region, where large numbers of arrivals of refugees can be observed or several reception and identification centres are located. Looking at the broadsheets from all three countries in our sample, the centre-left press publishes the largest share of articles concerned with refugees in relation to Covid-19, outweighing the centre-right press. Lastly, the Greek and British tabloids report more news items than the German tabloid, *Bild Zeitung*.

Regarding the way media outlets refer to the issue and the viewpoints they use, Figure 3 shows that the portrayal of refugees as victims is the most common category: 87.8% in the German case; 66% in the Greek case; and 81.6% in the UK. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Efimerida Ton Syntakton*, and *The Guardian* exert the highest number of this interpretative scheme with *Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *I Kathimerini*, and *The Telegraph* following. The centre-left newspapers in our sample seem to have relatively higher portrayals of refugees as victims, than the centre-

right media. Tabloids and regional press—apart from *Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung*—make substantially less use of this characterisation.

While we identify factual news items which do not use any particular frame on refugees in the context of the pandemic, negative viewpoints about them are also present; yet, to a far lesser degree than the most frequent perception (as victims). Last but not least, there are a few positive perceptions in Germany.

Table 2 gauges the sub-frames of the coverage by the newspapers in our sample related to the main frames of the research that is victims, positive, and negative viewpoints. Turning our attention to them, refugees are perceived, inter alia, as vulnerable, exposed to a higher risk of being infected as they live in overcrowded centres with poor health and sanitation infrastructure. More concretely, the German newspapers, in particular *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung*, underline that contact restrictions cannot be implemented in large accommodations, reporting on the Covid-19 outbreaks that occurred within them. In this regard, they are described as “potential coronavirus hotspots.” The British newspapers, mainly *The Guardian*, discuss the situation at the Napier barracks site in Kent, which accommodates several refugees, referring to allegations of inadequate conditions, poor food quality, and exposure to racist abuse. The Greek press, notably *Efimerida Ton Syntakton*, writes that thousands of refugees try to survive at the centre of Lesbos, where they experience miserable conditions.

Refugees are also considered some of the most marginalised people that withstand the worst of the pandemic. In Germany, attention is paid to the alleged increase of the refugees’ difficulties due to Covid-19, when it comes to their integration and the linguistic barriers they face. German and Greek news outlets write that the pandemic has increased inequality,

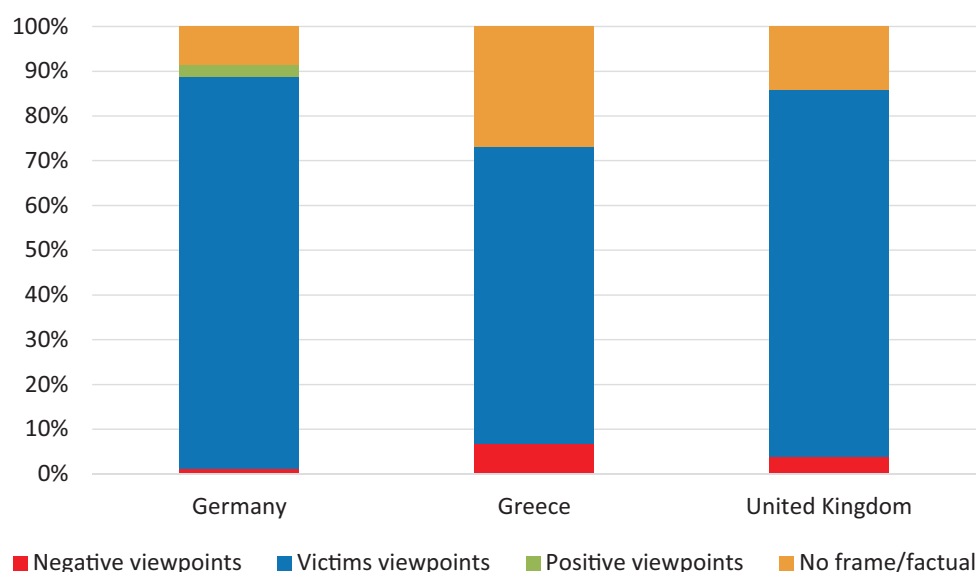


Figure 3. Distribution of viewpoints on refugees.

discrimination, and oppression against refugees, quoting the Amnesty International Annual Report 2020/21. In this regard, focus is given to the address of UN Secretary-General Guterres, who expresses the ascertainment that refugees are severely and disproportionately affected by Covid-19. The British press discussing their personal stories quotes them regarding the way their life has deteriorated.

Meanwhile, German and Greek media outlets, mostly *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung*, and *Efimerida Ton Syntakton*, touch upon the issue of the education of refugee minors, perceiving Covid-19 an insurmountable obstacle to this. It is widely written that the refugee minors are left out of distance

learning, as they do not have tablets or computers nor is there internet in the centres where they are hosted. In this context, they are described as “children of a lesser God” (Angelidis, 2021). Another sub-frame related to victims’ viewpoints and reported by the newspapers in the sample is that refugees and displaced persons are vulnerable, facing the risk of not being vaccinated.

Mainly tabloids or centre-right press quote different actors, who describe the refugee issue as a health threat/problem. Trains in India are filled with migrants, who threaten to further disperse Covid-19 into smaller towns and villages, the Greek tabloid *Proto Thema* notes. For its part, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* points out that the reception centre in Giessen constitutes a focal

Table 2. Main sub-frames of the refugees in total, per country and per newspaper, in percentage.

Main Sub-Frame	Total	Germany				Greece				United Kingdom			
Refugees are vulnerable, exposed to a higher risk of being infected due to the situation in reception/ detention centres	35.1	Total: 33.8				Total: 16.5				Total: 55			
		FAZ	SZ	BZ	HAZ	Kath	Ef. S.	Pr. Th.	Pel.	Tel.	GRD	DM	LES
		25.5	35.1	10.9	28.5	8.4	91.6	0	0	15.1	72.7	12.2	0
Refugees are some of the most marginalised people that withstand the worst of the pandemic	20.1	Total: 24.1				Total: 24.6				Total: 11.7			
		FAZ	SZ	BZ	HAZ	Kath	Ef. S.	Pr. Th.	Pel.	Tel.	GRD	DM	LES
		30	45	5	20	11.1	66.7	22.2	0	14.3	85.7	0	0
Covid-19 subverts the education of refugee minors	7.4	Total: 4.8				Total: 17.5				Total: 0			
		FAZ	SZ	BZ	HAZ	Kath	Ef. S.	Pr. Th.	Pel.				
		0	50	0	50	7.7	92.3	0	0				
Refugees and displaced persons are vulnerable, facing the risk of not being vaccinated	5.7	Total: 2				Total: 6.8				Total: 8.3			
		FAZ	SZ	BZ	HAZ	Kath	Ef. S.	Pr. Th.	Pel.	Tel.	GRD	DM	LES
		0	50	0	50	20	40	40	0	50	50	0	0
Refugees as a health threat/problem	5.1	Total: 3.6				Total: 6.8				Total: 5			
		FAZ	SZ	BZ	HAZ	Kath	Ef. S.	Pr. Th.	Pel.	Tel.	GRD	DM	LES
		33.3	0	66.7	0	40	20	40	0	33.3	0	66.7	0
Refugees as an opportunity	0.8	Total: 2.4				Total: 0				Total: 0			
		FAZ	SZ	BZ	HAZ								
		0	50	0	50								

Notes: FAZ stands for *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*; SZ stands for *Süddeutsche Zeitung*; BZ is for *Bild Zeitung*; HAZ is for *Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung*; Kath is for *Kathimerini*; EF.S. stands for *Efimerida ton Syntakton*; Pr.Th. is for *Proto Thema*; Pel. is for *Peloponnisos*; Tel stands for *The Telegraph*; GRD is for *The Guardian*; DM is for *Daily Mail*; LES is the *London Evening Standard*.

point of crime. Yet, there are also positive sub-frames, which consider migration an opportunity. For instance, *Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung*, reporting on the negative prospect of demographics in Germany estimated by the Federal Statistical Office, quotes one official from the Federal Institute for Population Research, who correlates the stagnation of the number of the population with the decreasing refugees' arrivals due to the pandemic and the associated travel restrictions.

When examining Figure 2 and Table 2, one may observe that, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, convergence or divergence of the pertinent reporting is more contingent on ideological leaning rather than media's nationality or the type of a traditional media system. For instance, there seems to be a convergence of the coverage of the centre-left newspapers when it comes to the (sub-)frames used. The same applies to the centre-right press across the countries. Instead, although *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Bild Zeitung* belong to the same media system (democratic corporatist), their coverage on the issue is likely to be considered divergent enough. A similar trend occurs in Greece and the UK when comparing *Efimerida Ton Syntakton* with *Proto Thema* and *The Guardian* with the *Daily Mail* respectively.

Centre-left newspapers showing more sympathy or empathy towards refugees seem to identify largely the challenges they face during the Covid-19 pandemic, attributing the biggest share of articles concerned with refugees in relation to Covid-19, as mentioned above. The centre-right newspapers and tabloids of our sample also touched upon these issues, yet to a shorter extent. In fact, in some cases, they applied negative viewpoints, portraying the refugees as a health threat. This angle was almost absent in the centre-left media outlets. Apart from Germany, where *Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung* reports much on the issue, adopting victims' viewpoints and relevant sub-frames, the regional press tends to attribute less coverage rather than the national newspapers do, limiting the scope of their content to factual (sub-)frames. Certainly, relying on one regional newspaper per country, the research carries the risk of overgeneralisation in this regard.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Through this analysis, we aimed at exploring the extent that the refugee issue was salient during the pandemic in the Greek, German, and British press. First, we identified and compared the number of articles reporting on the pandemic itself with the proportion of news items that mentioned the Covid-19 outbreak in relation to the refugee issue. Our results reinforced the assumption that epidemiological developments or other health aspects related to local populations seemed to overshadow the situation of refugees who were also exposed to this new threat (RQ1). The pertinent coverage dedicated to Covid-19 and refugees was scarce in the countries of our sample. However, it varied at the country

and newspaper level, with the centre-left newspapers reporting more than the centre-right, the regional, or tabloids. The British press published the least number of articles. However, looking at *The Guardian's* coverage on the issue, or comparing newspapers of the same origin (*Süddeutsche Zeitung* with *Bild Zeitung*), one may find that visibility is more contingent on political affiliation, rather than media's nationality or the type of a traditional media system.

Second, we focused on the main frames/viewpoints. The results showed that they diversified across the countries and newspapers' type in our sample. Victims' viewpoints was the most common category, entailing different sub-frames (RQ2). Centre-left newspapers in our sample showed more sympathy or empathy towards refugees, identifying to a large extent the challenges they face during the covid-19 pandemic. Other aspects that have been considered positive and related to the potential—economic, social, or other—benefits of migration by extant research (Van Gorp, 2005) were hardly mentioned. The context of the pandemic itself could explain this development.

Media outlets underlined the refugees' vulnerability and marginalisation in health, economic, and education terms. As mentioned above, political alignment seemed to have played a role in this regard, as centre-left newspapers along with *Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung* mainly used the particular sub-frame. An ideological and a political dimension could interpret the development. While centre-right ideology is likely to be associated with stronger anti-migrant positions (Downes et al., 2021), one could argue that the centre-left newspapers, in particular in Greece and the UK, implicitly criticised the countries' centre-right governments for the status of refugees within the reception centres. Finally, yet importantly, our results pointed out that mainly tabloids or centre-right press quoted different actors, who described the refugee issue as a health threat/problem.

Although our article is one-off and focuses on a time-limited period, we believe that it makes a relevant contribution to the literature on the refugee issue and media studies. First, the empirical research applied a cross-national and comparative dimension, which encompasses countries belonging to different media systems and newspapers of different types and political affiliations. Second, we showed that the media outlets in our sample scarcely referred to refugees, when reported on Covid-19. Refugees constitute one of the most vulnerable population groups, facing disproportionate hardships when it comes to access to healthcare (Shomron, 2021). Yet, the epidemiological developments or other health aspects related to local populations seem to overshadow the situation of refugees, whose position seemed to be further marginalised by the low media salience.

Third, we displayed the frames/viewpoints that journalists used in order to portray the refugees during the pandemic and provided a preliminary analysis on the aspects they focused on. This is particularly important

when considering that the salience of media coverage and news framing on migration exerts influence on associated attitudes and perceptions as well as on voting behaviour (Jacobs & Hooghe, 2015; Koopmans, 1996). Besides, in some cases, media have propagated prejudices, stereotypes, and eventually racism (van Dijk, 2000), promoting negative or antisocial perceptions through the process of constructing irrational collective representations. As migration is likely to stay and anti-immigrant parties are expected to fuel political discourse in the years to come, in particular ahead of elections, it is important to acquire a thorough knowledge about media's content on the refugee issue, exploring the potential motives behind it and its effect on public opinion. Finally, our approach provides an inclusive opportunity to rethink with openness how, through the media coverage, the cultural, social, or historical background of each country determines the reproduction of the previous "social constructions." Apparently, a challenging question remains open: Among national, political, and ideological factors, which is the most influential in this process?

However, we should mention certain limitations of our study that might be overcome by future research in the field. As this comparative, qualitative analysis of the news coverage of refugees in the context of Covid-19 is limited in time, future research should widen the period examined. At the same time, due to language limitations, we were not able to include in the analysis media outlets of the so-called group of Visegrád countries whose national governments have expressed their skepticism about the refugee issue. Meanwhile, we focused on two kinds of media, namely print and online press, rather than including audiovisual news items or social media. For instance, considering the importance of television or Twitter in formulating public opinion about the refugee issue, it would seem advisable for future studies to analyse the content of these sources. A recent study, focusing on social media users' perceptions of Asians in the US during the Covid-19 pandemic, has found prejudice and fear toward this population group (Croucher et al., 2020). In addition, relying on one regional newspaper per country, one could argue that the research does not entail the potentially different regional peculiarities within the countries of the sample. In this context, the situation when it comes to salience or media frames could be different if we selected more than one regional newspaper or a newspaper from a region where large numbers of arrivals of refugees can be observed or several reception and identification centres are located. Lastly, we did not address other potential factors that could reflect quantitative (number of articles) and qualitative (content diversity) differences between newspapers, namely structures of media ownership.

It is clear that the present article cannot cover the whole spectrum of the media concerning the issue of representations articulated in the bipolar "refugee issue and Covid-19 pandemic." Nevertheless, it offers a contempo-

rary view of how the media faced the refugee issue in the Covid-19 period updating figures and facets from an extremely complicated context. Additionally, it remains crucial to both map out and decode the views and figures presented in the public and social sphere in order to understand the orientation of the public perceptions that are formed. It is certain that each country has its own national characteristics and cultural peculiarities, and this is reflected in the way, through which the media formulate their strategy in the public sphere. However, among different countries, we should seek for a common ground to interpret all the *elective affinities* that are likely to co-form a solid and rational approach in the context of common European values. In a rapidly changing world, this could ultimately lead towards a more united and solidary Europe.

Conflict of Interests

The views set out in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the EU. Neither the EU institutions and bodies nor any person acting on their behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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