

Van Neste-Gottignies, Amandine (à paraître 2023), « What is news? The mediatization of the 2015 Refugee Reception Crisis in Europe », *Tripodos*.

## “What is news?” The mediatization of the 2015 Refugee Reception Crisis in Europe

Van Neste-Gottignies, Amandine, Université libre de Bruxelles

### Abstract

“What is news?” This question, that has occupied journalism research for more than fifty years, is a way of understanding how the 2015 “refugee reception crisis” became news through a process of mediatization. Since Galtung and Ruge's well-known work (1965) on the criteria adopted by journalists to select information, *news values* have been the subject of numerous analyses, particularly considering the historical upheavals in the media field. Following a critical and comprehensive approach, this article tries to unveil, from the taxonomy of news values, how an event becomes a media event. On the one hand, the analysis model developed in this article can be transposed to other events for a better understanding of communication issues. On the other hand, approaching the refugee reception crisis in the light of news values invites a new reading of its issues. Starting from the case and context of the crisis in Belgium and placing them more broadly in the European context, this article raises questions that go beyond national borders. It proposes a European reading of migration and media issues.

Keywords: news values, mediatization, media, refugee crisis, reception

### Introduction

This is not a crisis which belongs to Europe. It is a crisis experienced by those who are forced to flee their homes, a traumatic experience which is aggravated by being met with hostility and aversion after making a dangerous journey and when trying to claim asylum, a universal human right (Leurs and Smets, 2018: 4).

“Migration crisis”, “migrant crisis”, “refugee crisis”, “asylum crisis”, “crisis of European institutions” and finally “reception crisis”. To make an event exist, it is necessary to name it (Charaudeau, 2011: 108). According to Catherine Wihtol de Wenden, “more than a “refugee crisis”, we should speak of a “refugee reception crisis” (2016: 5). In the European context of 2015, the *mediatization* and de politization of migration issues, but also of asylum rights, draw attention to the capacity (or inability) of destination countries to take responsibility for the reception of asylum seekers (Tissier-Raffin, 2015). Reception as a media and/or political issue is being debated across Europe. In the media as well as in political and scientific debates, voices are being raised in favor of using the term “refugee reception crisis” rather than “migration crisis” (Rea *et al.*, 2019: 16). This event (“refugee reception crisis”) is the result of a work of ordering meaning. Indeed, men and women have been crossing borders every day since time immemorial. However, in 2015, this historical and cyclical phenomenon, through a “process of mediatization” (Bonnafoos, 1999: 2) is becoming the dominant theme of Belgian and European

political, social and media agendas. Mediatization is understood as “the complex process resulting from the interaction between various collective and individual actors and leading to the presence of a subject in the mass media and conflicts for the interpretation and attribution of symbolic values” (Bonnafous, 1999: 2).

“What is news?” (Harcup and O’Neill, 2017). This question, which has occupied journalism research for more than fifty years, is a way of understanding how the 2015 refugee reception crisis became a media event.

Since Galtung and Ruge’s well-known work (1965) on the criteria adopted by journalists to select information, *news values* have been the subject of numerous analyses, particularly considering the historical upheavals in the media field. In this article, news values are not considered as a list of criteria with watertight boundaries, but as a heuristic tool, allowing us to deconstruct the different facets that structure the “refugee reception crisis” event. The criteria under studied in the analysis are magnitude, relevance, drama, audio-visuals, shareability surprise and celebrity (Harcup and O’Neill, 2017).

This article tries to unveil, from the taxonomy of news values, how an event becomes news. On the one hand, the analysis model developed in this article can be transposed to other events for a better understanding of communication issues. On the other hand, approaching the refugee reception crisis in the light of news values invites a new reading of its issues.

Starting from the case and context of the crisis in Belgium and placing them more broadly in the European context, this article raises questions that go beyond national borders. It therefore proposes a European reading of migration and media issues.

The article is based on an extensive documentary work aimed at a global and contextualized understanding of the phenomenon studied: press and media articles (46 articles), Laws, parliamentary resources, official texts (28 documents) and institutional sources (associations, NGOs, international organizations, asylum authorities, etc.) (55 documents) (see tab.1 in appendix). Following a critical and comprehensive approach, the article uses the news values taxonomy to understand the process of mediatization of the event “reception refugee crisis”.

## 1. Magnitude: number, geographic scope, and potential impact

*“Magnitude: stories perceived as sufficiently significant in the large numbers of people involved or in potential impact, or involving a degree of extreme behavior or extreme occurrence” (Harcup and O’Neill, 2017: 1482).*

### 1.1 Number: temporality and visibility

#### 1.1.1 The absolute number

“At the beginning of 2015, there were almost 65 million forcibly displaced people worldwide (UNHCR), a number not reached since the Second World War”(149<sup>1</sup>). In Belgium, nearly 39,000 people made a first asylum application in 2015, three times more than in 2014. Between June

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<sup>1</sup> The code refers to the source of the information (details in tab.1, in appendix). “I” for institutional document, “O” for official document and “P” for press and media articles.

and December 2015, the reception network increased from 16,000 to 33,000 places and the number of reception asylum centers from 48 to 90. “From a quantitative point of view, this is the largest increase in capacity that the reception sector has seen in Belgium”(I49). The occupancy rate of the reception network reached 97% in December 2015. However, this is not the first time that Belgium has experienced a large number of asylum application. During the Balkan crisis in 2000, Belgium had about 8,000 more asylum seekers than in 2015.

Numbers alone do not explain the media coverage of this crisis. The temporality of the “flow” has, for its part, contributed to making the invisible visible, and to increase the magnitude effect.

### *1.1.2 Temporality: a peak during summer months*

Indeed, in 2015, the arrival of asylum seekers is concentrated in a few months. Between April and September, the number of first-time asylum seekers increased threefold (I49). The weather conditions during the summer months are indeed more favorable for taking migratory routes.

The political and administrative choices made to manage the arrival of this large number of people lead to the formation of long queues in front of the Immigration Office (the body responsible for registering asylum applications in Belgium) and to gatherings around asylum instances. The number of asylum seekers is therefore becoming visible in the public space. Previously, this public was confined to closed or remote places: closed centers, prisons, reception centers, asylum institutions, specific associations.

### *1.1.3 Visibility: non-registration, and quotas*

Initially, the asylum authorities are technically unable, in terms of infrastructure and staff, to register all the asylum applications. A Monday in August, “in a single day, the Immigration Office had to refuse 280 asylum seekers” (P36). The Secretary of state for Asylum and Migration, Theo Francken<sup>2</sup>, then decided to limit the number of registrations to 250 per day, while the number of people in front of the Office was sometimes more than double (P34).

The non-registration of asylum applications is defined as “an administrative practice of not directly registering asylum applications”(I11). Neither Belgian nor European legislation “allows the limitation of the asylum seekers registration number, for example by setting a maximum quota per day”(I49). Indeed, “these practices keep the people to whom they apply outside the scope of the law and all the protections and guarantees that it offers”(I49). Hence, the unregistered people end up sleeping in the streets of the capital.

The non-registration is largely aimed at avoiding saturation of the reception network. On this point, Theo Francken declared in the press: “I cannot open 10,000 places in one day, I am neither a magician nor Superman!”(P34). By limiting the number of registrations, it is “migrants” who end up on the street and not “asylum seekers”. They are the same people, but they belong to different administrative categories.

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<sup>2</sup> In Belgium, all aspects linked to migration are integrated into one cabinet under the responsibility of the Belgian Secretary of state for Asylum and Migration, a post held between 2014 and 2018 by Theo Francken from Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA), a Flemish nationalist party.

The choice to limit the number of registrations is also part of Theo Francken's anti-migration policy strategy (Deleixhe, 2018: 130). Indeed, the communication around these measures sends a message to potential migrants. By showing that Belgium does not receive its asylum seekers well, Theo Francken intends to limit the “pull-factor” (*appel d’air*) and dissuade migrants from applying for asylum in Belgium (Deleixhe, 2018: 130). Quotas are also used by other European states, such as Austria, as a strategy to dissuade migrants from settling permanently in the country (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2017).

Moreover, these practices have helped to make the presence of asylum seekers visible in the heart of Brussels. Indeed, the formation of long queues and gatherings of people who cannot register their asylum application no longer confine asylum seekers to invisible places.

### 1.2 Geographical scale: a European crisis

The geographical scope of the crisis also explains its mediatization. Indeed, during the 2000 crisis in the context of the Kosovo war, Europe as a whole was not affected, but in 2015 it is.

In 2015, 1 255 600 first-time asylum seekers applied for international protection in EU Member States, more than double the number in the previous year. Not all EU Member States are equally exposed, but the number of asylum applications is increasing almost everywhere<sup>3</sup>. In 2015, the highest number - in absolute terms – was recorded in Germany (35% of all asylum seekers in the EU), followed by Hungary (14%), Sweden (12%), Austria (7%), Italy (7%) and France (6%).

Compared to 2014, the number of asylum seekers increased the most in Finland (+822%), Hungary (+323%), Austria (+233%), Belgium (+178%), Spain (+167%) and finally Germany (+155%)(I26). “Since the beginning of the collection of asylum statistics at EU level (since 2008), the number of asylum seekers has never been so high”(I2).

The scale effect is not only measured in terms of numbers, visibility and geographical extent. It is also measured in terms of the potential impact that an event can have on the society. What does the arrival of large numbers of asylum seekers mean for Belgian and European society?

### 1.3 The potential impact: threat and integration

Beyond its visibility, the numbers are frightening. On the one hand, the use in the media and in political discourse of metaphors that invite the quantification of human beings - influx, flow, wave, surge, absorption, increase, decrease, tide, congestion, etc. - carries very specific representations. - They detach these men and women from the world they live in. They detach these men and women from their humanity, transforming them into an anonymous and uncontrollable mass (Leurs and Smets, 2018: 5). Uncontrollable and therefore anxiety-provoking. This arrival is frightening (Berry *et al.*, 2015): “representing them as a number or an anonymous mass eclipse their personal histories as human beings” (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017: 616). On the other hand, the use of figures and quantifications present migration as a major problem to be solved: the potential impact on the lives of Belgians is perceived as important (De Coninck, 2020).

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<sup>3</sup> Except Romania, Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Latvia and Lithuania.

If the number is frightening, it is because these thousands of arrivals are presented as a cultural, security and economic threat. The foreigner portrayed as a threat is far from being a novelty. The socio-economic, security and cultural logics underlying these representations have structured political and media discourses on the arrival and presence of migrants, and more specifically asylum seekers and refugees in Belgium since the early 1980s (De Cleen *et al.*, 2017). These logics have been adapted to the specific context of 2015.

Firstly, the image of the fraudster and profiteer who would be hiding among these mixed flows of people arriving in Belgium is widely mobilized by Theo Francken (De Cleen *et al.*, 2017): “on the margins of this flow of refugees in need of protection, we also observe a flow of economic migrants towards Europe”(O25). In these discourses, this image is coupled with the limited capacity of host countries: “Belgium does more than its share [...]. The international crisis situation puts enormous pressure on a small group of Member States, including Belgium. Our reception capacity is not infinite”(O25). The presence of these “economic migrants” in search of social and economic benefits (Carlson *et al.*, 2018) would justify the dissuasive measures taken by European governments to limit the attraction. Measures which, as mentioned, contribute to reinforcing the scale of the phenomenon and justify its mediatization.

Secondly, “the terrorist attacks in 2015 also played a role in the focus on asylum seekers and migrants on their way to Europe” (Sow, 2016: 45). In this context, migrants are framed as threats to both the security and culture of the host country.

Indeed, in 2015 and 2016, Europe and, more particularly, France and Belgium, were struck by a deadly wave of terrorist attacks claimed by the Islamic State. These attacks were widely covered by the media (Wagener, 2021, [online]). The two events (“asylum crisis” and “terrorist attacks”) are interconnected in media, political and institutional discourses. The issue of terrorism influences that of reception crisis by generating a sense of fear: terrorists from Islamist organizations, back from Syria, would be mixed with migrants (Sow, 2016: 45-46). In political discourses, Theo Francken also links these two issues: in order to fight terrorism, the government must take restrictive and security measures towards refugees (De Cleen *et al.*, 2017).

The issue of terrorism also reactivates another logic, the cultural threat, particularly towards asylum seekers of the Muslim faith. Indeed, fears related to the “colonization” of Belgian and European cultures by Islam are widely present in discourses about asylum seekers and migrants (Berry *et al.*, 2015; Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017; Holmes and Castañeda, 2016). They are said to threaten liberal values such as secularism and gender equality, which are presented as integral to Belgian and European identities (De Cleen *et al.*, 2017).

In January 2016, an incident at a swimming pool in Koksijde, a seaside resort in Belgium, illustrates well the cultural threat. A 23-year-old Iraqi asylum seeker was wrongly accused of sexually assaulting a young girl at the Koksijde swimming pool. While no investigation has yet been carried out, the mayor of Koksijde, Marc Vanden Bussche, says he wants to ban all asylum seekers from the swimming pool. The Iraqi asylum seeker was placed directly in a closed center before being released a few days later following a decision by the Belgian Council Chamber (P46).

The magnitude effect is also linked to the rate of protection of people seeking asylum in Belgium.

Contrary to the reception crisis of 2000 in Belgium, the protection rate (granting of refugee status or subsidiary protection) is high in 2015: it exceeds 60% of applications, but reaches 97% for Syrians, 77% for Afghans and 72% for Iraqis (I2). By way of comparison, this rate was only 7% in 2000 and, at that time, subsidiary protection, which represents 10% of recognitions in 2015, did not exist. Beyond the number of people who arrive on Belgian territory, there is the question of their integration into society. These people will remain on Belgian territory in the long term.

## 2. The profile of asylum seekers: relevance, proximity, and drama

The profile of the asylum seekers arriving in 2015 and the context in which they flee played an important role in the media coverage.

### 2.1 Relevance: cultural and contextual proximity

*“Relevance: Stories about groups or nations perceived to be influential with, or culturally or historically familiar to, the audience” (Harcup and O’Neill, 2017: 1482).*

In Belgium in 2015, 63% of first asylum applications came from people whose country of origin was Syria, Afghanistan, or Iraq, whereas in 2000, 30 different nationalities made up 85% of first asylum applications.

While conflicts in the Near and Middle East have been raging for several years already<sup>4</sup>, the years 2014 and 2015 were characterized by a resurgence of violence in response to the Islamic State's proclamation of the “caliphate” over large areas of Syria and Iraq. At the same time, health and humanitarian conditions are deteriorating in the neighboring countries of first asylum (Fargues, 2015). Indeed, many refugees from Syria and Afghanistan initially seek refuge in neighboring countries, mainly in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey. The deterioration of their living conditions as well as “the absence of any prospect of short-term improvement in their countries of origin has also put pressure on what was initially envisaged as a temporary solution in a neighboring country” (I2).

Unlike in the 2000s, in 2015, asylum seekers have an identity, a face. A profile is emerging they may be men, women, families or children who have fled a country destabilized by war (Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq) and who have taken risks to reach European borders. The media and the public can easily create a mental image. The Syrian is portrayed as the war refugee par excellence (Akoka, 2016). The Belgian - and more broadly European - population identifies with them in terms of education level, lifestyle, appearance and sometimes religion (a proportion of the Syrians are from Christian minorities). Moreover, the presence of families and young children gives them legitimacy. On the other hand, the new ideological (and geopolitical) underpinning that characterizes these wars and conflicts, the “Islamist issue”, supports the proximity between Europeans and Syrians (Akoka, 2016). Indeed, Syrians are fleeing both the

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<sup>4</sup> Since 2011 in Syria in the context of the Arab Spring, since 2001 in Afghanistan and 2003 in Iraq as part of the “war on terror” led by the Bush administration following the attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States.

Islamic State, “the new paradigmatic enemy of Western democracies” (Akoka, 2016: [online]) and the regime of Bashar El Assad, with which ties have been severed (ibid., 2016). This proximity felt with these populations is exacerbated by the context of the terrorist attacks in Europe. The Syrian refugee is therefore represented in the press and in political discourse as a victim (De Cleen *et al.*, 2017).

The “asylum reception crisis” is making the headlines. The number of news was increasing, and, by the end of 2015, it has become the major talk of the town in all European countries (Berry *et al.*, 2015; Holmes and Castañeda, 2016). In a snowball effect, Belgian newsrooms, like those in other EU countries, are informing and picking up the news that is dominant in neighboring European countries.

## 2.2 Deaths in the Mediterranean: a drama at the gate of Europe

*“Drama: Stories concerning an unfolding drama such as escapes, accidents, searches, sieges, rescues, battles or court cases” (Harcup and O’Neill, 2017: 1482).*

The country of origin of asylum seekers, mainly from the Near and Middle East, the dangerous routes and means of transport they use, and the decisions of European governments in the governance of borders, lead to the tragic deaths of thousands of people. These tragedies are widely covered by the media.

More than one million migrants arrived in Europe in 2015 by sea, about 4.5 times more than in 2014 (I50). The unprecedented number of dead and missing people in the Mediterranean reached 3,771 (I55) for the year 2015. The EU is investing in rescue operations in the central and eastern Mediterranean, through Frontex's Triton and Poseidon operations. However, it is also strengthening control at sea with the military operation Sophia to fight criminal networks of human traffickers (I50).

Powerful images of rough and dangerous boats, shipwrecks and even dead bodies illustrate these dramas and circulate in the European media. Some images have now become iconic, such as the photo of Aylan, a dead three-year-old Syrian child washed up on a Turkish beach (Leurs and Smets, 2018: 6). This human drama is not played out on the other side of the world, but on the borders of Europe, which makes it relevant in terms of its geographical proximity.

## 3. Media context: audio-visual content to share

*“Audio-visuals: Stories that have arresting photographs, video, audio and/or which can be illustrated with infographics” (Harcup and O’Neill, 2017: 1482).*

*“Shareability: Stories that are thought likely to generate sharing and comments via Facebook, Twitter and other forms of social media” (Harcup and O’Neill, 2017: 1482).*

Audio-visual content shareable on social networks also contributes to the process of mediatization. Indeed, the media context plays a particular role in 2015 compared to previous crises. By means of new technologies images can be recorded by mobile phones and quickly share on social networks (Sow, 2016). Journalists have images at their disposal continually: “the

particularity of our time compared to 2000 also lies in the fact that a piece of information, a photo or a video can, by creating an event on social networks because it is so widely shared, end up on the front page of traditional media” (Sow, 2016: 46). The photo of Aylan illustrates this phenomenon well, and acquires a symbolic dimension (Neveu, 2015: 16). Alongside this tragic image, others will mark memories. Images that are often polarized: on the one hand, life stories, faces, children, families, victims, humanitarian actors; on the other, masses of threatening individuals and control devices (d’Haenens et al., 2019).

Again, the geographical scope reinforces this criterion: “if newsrooms are overflowing with images [...], it is also because the crisis concerns all of Europe” (Sow, 2016: 47-49). The sharing of content via European news agencies is important in the context of budgetary restrictions faced by Belgian and European newsrooms (Sow, 2016: 47-49).

#### 4. Controversies, disputes, struggles: actors in conflict

*“Conflict: Stories concerning conflict such as controversies, arguments, splits, strikes, fights, insurrections and warfare” (Harcup and O’Neill, 2017: 1482).*

Like the polarized figure of the asylum seeker, the 2015 crisis has generated discussions, debates, controversies, and polemics. Indeed, the fields of asylum and reception are characterized by a plurality of actors who differ in their nature, history, interests, and values, but also by important political divisions (Author, 2022). The 2015 crisis become an object of struggle between them. The media has thus constituted an arena in which everyone defends their vision of the event.

##### 4.1 The institutional discourse: the “sudden” and surprising nature of the crisis.

*“Surprise: Stories that have an element of surprise, contrast and/or the unusual about them” (Harcup and O’Neill, 2017: 1482).*

The “surprise” of asylum and reception authorities<sup>5</sup>, the emergency measures taken due to the so-called “sudden” nature of the crisis and their consequences, and finally the controversies surrounding these measures, have largely contributed to the process of mediatization.

Asylum and reception authorities and the Secretary of state for Asylum and Migration describe the event as “sudden” and “unpredictable”. The unpredictable nature of the events of 2015 has been discussed several times in the Belgian House of Representatives. Already in September 2015, Wouter De Vriendt, a member of the opposition from the ecologist party, confronted Theo Francken during an exchange of views about “the government’s measures regarding the reception of the growing number of asylum seekers” (O14). The ecologist declares: “According to the Secretary of state, the current problems were not foreseeable, but many organizations, including the United Nations, believe the opposite. The conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia have been raging for many years” (O14). The opposition criticizes the Secretary of state for adopting problematic measures from a legal point of view.

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<sup>5</sup> The Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers, the Immigration Office and the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons responsible for examining asylum applications and granting or refusing refugee protection.



Indeed, for the reception and asylum authorities, the “sudden” character justifies the implementation of an exceptional and derogatory system in relation to the normative (the law).

#### 4.2 Political discourse: Theo Francken, the star of the media

*“Celebrity: Stories concerning people who are already famous” (Harcup and O’Neill, 2017: 1482).*

Theo Francken, from the New Flemish Alliance party (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie, N-VA), contributed to making the 2015 crisis a media event. Indeed, the N-VA is a right-wing conservative Flemish nationalist party (De Cleen *et al.*, 2017). While there are debates in the scientific literature about the “populist” and “far-right” character of this party (Jamin, 2014; Delwit, 2019), its “anti-immigration” stance is widely supported by researchers (Adam and Deschouwer, 2016; De Cleen *et al.*, 2017; Delwit, 2019). The N-VA is the most represented political party in the media; Theo Francken is the most quoted political figure (Mistiaen, 2021). As State Secretary for Asylum and Migration, Theo Francken embodies Belgian migration policy and is therefore “the strongest voice in discussions on the refugee crisis” (De Cleen *et al.*, 2017: 34). During the crisis, Theo Francken became a celebrity and was even described as a “star” by certain media: “Theo Francken. Mr. polarizing, rising star of the N-VA” (P29), “Theo Francken, superstar” (P35). Moreover, his strong presence on social networks (Van Leuven *et al.*, 2019) also contributes to his popularity and the visibility of his interventions.

The divisive nature of his public interventions provokes controversy over and over again: “60 to 70% of asylum seekers lie about one aspect of their identity” (P19), “according to the police, there is hardly anyone left in the park. #cleanup” (P15), “I can imagine the added value of the Jewish, Chinese and Indian diasporas, but not so much of the Moroccan, Congolese or Algerian diasporas” (P45). In the same way, some of his restrictive political decisions also maintain the debates on the crisis, such as the launch of deterrence campaigns for Afghans (P18).

Theo Francken thus repeatedly causes a “political and media frenzy” (Maly, 2016: 178). His political opponents denounce the xenophobic character of his words and measures and call for his resignation (Maly, 2016: 178). The non-profit sector has repeatedly opposed Theo Francken's policy via the media. However, in this arena, a new actor is becoming the strongest voice to counter Theo Francken's speeches: the Citizens’ Platform Supporting Refugees.

#### 4.3 Unprecedented citizen mobilization: the new voice

Due to the non-registration of asylum applications, many people have to sleep on the streets. Some of them decided to settle in the Maximilian Park located in front of the Immigration Office. The Citizens’ Platform Supporting Refugees was set up to manage the “camp” in the center of the capital. It is therefore the direct product of the Belgian government's political decision. Despite the short life of the camp (from September to October 2015), the Platform, still active today, marks the institutionalization of citizen mobilization in the migration sector.

The Platform takes the opposing view of the dominant political discourse and became the alternative voice - the humanitarian one - most present in the media. “It received huge media coverage in Belgium and generated a temporary wave of public sympathy for refugees that

contrasted sharply with the widely welcomed restrictive policies of recent years” (Lafaut and Coene, 2018: 2).

The Platform meticulously orchestrated its media appearances (Author, 2022). Beyond the traditional media, the grassroots movement took advantage of the technological context: “the use of social networks is essential to understand the mobilization that took place around the camps” (Masson Diez, 2018: 172) and their visibility.

Moreover, through its “architecture”, the Platform has also helped to make the invisible, visible. This large green area in the business district is not located on the outskirts, but in the heart of Brussels, the administrative capital of the European Union. Every day, hundreds of workers, commuters, residents, and tourists pass by this open-air camp. The asylum seekers have a face, but they are also visible.

The Platform became a “claim-maker” or an “entrepreneur of causes” as Neveu said (2015: 16). Indeed, they contributed to making the issue of reception management the subject of debate and, ultimately, they forced political actors to act (Neveu, 2015: 17). In response to the camp, the public authorities proposed to organize a “pre-reception” in public buildings at the end of September 2015.

This phenomenon goes beyond Belgium: all over Europe, a political contestation is rising and emerging through the action of activists, grassroots organizations, and even ordinary citizens (Rosenberger, 2018: 3), to counter the European policies put in place to manage the crisis.

#### 4.4 A “crisis” of Europe

The conflicting management of the arrival of migrants by the European Union also contributes to the media coverage of the crisis. The Member States are unable to take joint decisions: the crisis is then described as a “crisis of Europe”, a “crisis of the European institutions”, and finally, a “crisis of solidarity” between states facing the reception of asylum seekers (Wihtol de Wenden, 2017; Rea *et al.*, 2019).

European states accuse each other of being responsible for the crisis. Greece, unable to control its borders, is accused of being a bad pupil (150); Germany of kindling the pull-factor; Hungary and Austria, which refuse relocation agreements, of being xenophobic countries. Indeed, in the summer of 2015, German Chancellor Angela Merkel defined Germany as a country of immigration and the reception of new migrants as a challenge “that society must take up in order to remain faithful to humanist values” (Verronneau, 2021: [online]). Her slogan goes viral: *Wir schaffen das!* (“We will make it!”) (Verronneau, 2021: [online]). Her political choices at the beginning of this period of crisis led to the expansion of the Refugees Welcome movement throughout Europe. A gap increased between the hospitable attitude of some states and the anti-welcome tendencies of others (Rea *et al.*, 2019: 13).

The failure to reach agreement on the European Commission's relocation proposals is a case in point. In early summer 2015, Jean-Claude Juncker, then President of the European Commission, proposed the relocation of 40,000 refugees from Italy and Greece across different European states. The political agreement was “formally approved in September, having also obtained the agreement of the European Parliament”. However, the mechanism, which was intended to be

compulsory, is becoming voluntary, due to a lack of consensus. Austria and Hungary, for example, do not offer any relocation places in this system. A second plan seeks to impose on the 28 countries of the Union the sharing and the relocation of 160,000 asylum seekers. However, this plan was refused by Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland “in the name of preserving their national homogeneity” (Wihtol de Wenden, 2017: 194). The relocation programs born of the 2015 crisis remain, therefore, mechanisms subject to the goodwill of states.

These refusals reveal a lack of solidarity towards countries undergoing strong migratory pressure. Europe therefore decided to develop the Hotspot approach in these countries. Hotspots are areas located at the EU's external borders which, according to the European Commission, are subject to “disproportionate migratory pressure” (Rodier, 2018) (in Moria, on the island of Lesbos, in Lampedusa, in Trapani, etc.). According to this approach, these countries are supported by European agencies (mainly the European Asylum Support Office and the Frontex agency), which must ensure that all migrants entering European territory are identified and registered: those eligible for asylum are taken care of, the others are sent back (Rodier, 2018: 1). The aim is to separate the “real” refugees from those who migrate for other reasons.

This approach is not enough. From autumn 2015, several Schengen countries tried to block asylum seekers from Greece. Some unilaterally decided to temporarily re-establish internal border controls up the Balkan route: Germany in September, followed by Austria, Slovenia, Hungary, Norway, Denmark, etc.

At the same time, collaboration is taking place between some EU Member States (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland) and countries in the western Balkans, such as Serbia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. These collaborations aim to prevent asylum seekers from Greece from reaching northern and western Europe. The western Balkans became a buffer zone. These measures were once again deemed insufficient. Europe then decided to stop the “flow” upstream. On 29 November 2015, the EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan (I21) came into force to prevent asylum seekers from reaching Greece. In March 2016, a new agreement was signed with Turkey. The EU-Turkey Statement states that “all new irregular migrants departing from Turkey to the Greek islands as of 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey” (I21). In return, the agreement provides for the resettlement of up to 72,000 Syrians from Turkey to EU countries. The EU-Turkey agreement is one of the externalization tools available to the EU to manage external border control (Teule, 2017) and to block the arrival of asylum seekers.

The European debates on the migration issue, the inability to give a joint response, the restrictive measures such as the hotspot approach and the EU-Turkey agreement contribute to the process of mediatization of the 2015 reception crisis.

## Conclusion

This article aims, from the taxonomy of news values, to understand how the 2015 refugee reception crisis becomes news through the complex process of mediatization. Using the taxonomy as a heuristic tool allows us to understand the mediatization process in all its complexity. Indeed, one or several criteria cannot explain the intricacy of this process. It is the

congruence, the overlapping, and the superimposition of all these criteria that builds the media event. That was the moment.

Firstly, the magnitude effect plays a role in the process of mediatization. In 2015, the number of forcibly displaced people in the world was the highest since the Second World War. However, the absolute number on his own do does not explain the media coverage of this crisis. The temporality of the “flow” has also contributed to making the invisible asylum seekers, visible, and to increase the magnitude effect as well as the geographical scope of the crisis. The magnitude is also measured in terms of the potential impact that an event can have on the society. The number of asylum seekers is frightening because these thousands of arrivals are presented as a cultural, security and economic threat in media and political discourses. The magnitude is also linked to the rate of protection of people seeking asylum. Beyond the number of people who arrive on Belgian territory, there is the question of their integration into society. These people will remain on Belgian territory in the long term.

Secondly, the profile of the asylum seekers arriving in 2015 and the context in which they flee played an important role in the media coverage. On the one hand, it is relevant for Belgian and European audiences to be informed about the context of Syrian flight, in particular, because of their cultural and historical proximity to the Belgian and European populations. On the other hand, the means of transport that asylum seekers are forced to use have led to tragedies in the Mediterranean, a factor that also contributes to the media coverage of the event.

Thirdly, audio-visual content shareable on social networks also contributes to the process of mediatization. Again, the geographical scope reinforces this criterion.

Finally, the 2015 crisis has generated discussions, debates, controversies, and polemics. It becomes an object of struggle between a plurality of actors. The media has thus constituted an arena in which everyone defends their vision of the event. From the discourse of state institutions on the “sudden” nature of the crisis, through the polemical outbursts of Theo Francken and the significant media coverage of the Citizens’ Platform Supporting Refugees, to the inability of the European states to agree on common actions, these conflicts have greatly contributed to the media coverage of this event.

The war in Ukraine and the arrival of thousands of uprooted “Europeans” in European member states makes the use of the news values taxonomy even stronger. Exceptional measures are taken by the EU and Belgium for Ukrainian refugees: the Council of the Union unanimously decides to apply for the first time a 2001 directive granting “temporary protection” to refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine. Belgium, for its part, releases funds for the first time to support refugees from the Ukraine. A wave of solidarity mobilized all the actors in society: citizens and associations, universities, politicians. Even the former Secretary of State for anti-immigration positions, Theo Francken, is mobilizing to provide material assistance to the Ukrainian refugees who arrive in Poland every day. On his social networks, the politician publishes a series of photos and tweets to show his solidarity with the Ukrainian refugees. In Belgium, the Platform for Refugees launched the “All Refugees Welcome” movement in March 2022 to defend an equal welcome for asylum seekers. The movement organizes a demonstration in Brussels to fight against racism and discrimination, which activists say operate in the reception and asylum sectors in Belgium and Europe. On the other hand, controversial statements by statesmen are causing controversy. For example, when Kiril Petkov, the Bulgarian Prime Minister said: “These

are not the refugees we are used to [but] Europeans. They are intelligent, they are educated” (P11). These controversies invite the media to take up the issue: “true or false: with Ukrainian refugees, Europeans are rediscovering a sense of welcome” (P40); “Why are Ukrainians better received than other refugees?” (P10); “Are Ukrainian refugees better received than others?” (P10).

This last example shows the acuity and relevance of the news values taxonomy as a comprehensive tool in a context marked by a new war and new concerns.

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