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Refugees or (im)migrants: (re)conceptualizing
and (re)contextualizing migration in the
media



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Refugees or (im)migrants: (re)conceptualizing and (re)contextualizing migration in the media

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Abstract

The article examines how the media around the world perceived and reported on migration and refugees in the period from 2015 to 2022 in five selected countries, during the period of the strongest waves of the European migration crisis, the adoption of international agreements for their (political) solution, as well as the beginning of the Ukraine conflict. The first aim of the study was to find out whether we are witnessing an increasing similarity or diversification of the content of migration-related news in five different countries and languages and whether theoretical reconceptualizations that have emerged in migration studies have a significant impact on the way migration is reported in the media. Overall, our study shows that empirical contextualizations have a more significant impact on media coverage of migration than theoretical conceptualizations. In other words, theoretical conceptualizations that have emerged in migration research do not have a significant impact on the way migration is reported in the media. Other (news) factors or values arising from specific social contexts are more important. For example, the coverage of migration is primarily situated in a national political context and reflects the most important issues of the time. Thus, our analysis shows that the media in Slovenia paid relatively high attention to the November 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. However, the reason for this was not the content of the Compact, but the fact that the Compact was discussed in the Slovenian parliament and the Slovenian right-wing media used this discussion as an opportunity for a series of comments directed against migrants who were portrayed as having come to Slovenia en masse and illegally. Moreover, the concepts of "migrant" and "refugee" often overlap in journalistic discourse, further underpinning the lack of a clear conceptualization of migration in the media, despite the fact that academic and journalistic fields of knowledge are very different and in some respects almost mutually exclusive.

Keywords: Scientific and media conceptualizations, refugees, migrants, internet media,.

Introduction

Conceptualization is an epistemic process in which the research concepts are defined and specified. It is a vital part of a research process since it substantiates specificities of the measurement process in the given study. In deductive research, conceptualization helps translate (abstract) theory into testable hypotheses involving specific variables. In inductive research, conceptualization is an important part of generalizing and making sense of related empirical findings and observations. Particular conceptualizations can have specific strengths and weaknesses in both theoretical and policy terms, as conceptualization is not only an integral part of any research, but also has an important impact on policy decisions and actions, and can also be reflected in media reporting, which will be the focus of our study.

Reconceptualization refers to the process in which the meaning of concepts changes when (or because) they come into "collision" with new theoretical insights or when they are extracted from one disciplinary framework and inserted into another. As a result, the definitions of concepts may also change. Reconceptualization can often occur as a result of de- and re-*contextualization*, i.e. the (re)emergence of a given concept in a new (different) social context – a new empirical or experiential environment. Typical examples include the translation of a

term from one language to another and operational definitions in intercultural research, which implies a change in cultural context, or major technological and societal events and changes, such as digitization or globalization. In all such cases, the position and relationship of a given concept to other concepts in the conceptual universe changes due to wider topical and geographical contexts. Migration is a case in point to demonstrate that reconceptualization is not only a matter of new scientific perspectives, but also of changes in popular understanding. Such changes are particularly evident in popular and political ideas about why and how migration occurs and with what consequences, which are spread by the mass media and, more recently, social networks.

In contrast to conceptualization, by which the key elements of a concept are defined, *framing* is the process of presenting content with narrowed and *pre-planned contextualization*. By making particular aspects of an issue more salient and using different modes of presentation, the media strives to influence people's attitudes. Framing theory is based on the idea that the media directs attention to certain events or issues and places them in a semantic field, which plays an important role in shaping people's perceptions, opinions and beliefs. While *agenda setting* refers to the media efforts to set the agenda for issues to be (publicly) prioritized and discussed, framing goes a step further by determining not only what issues the audience should discuss, but also how to think about them. In general, media issues are higher on media agenda in countries receiving migrants than in countries from which migration originates. When reporting on migration and migrants, the media link or frame them with key domestic political, economic and social issues in the receiving countries, but not in the countries of origin. Media coverage of migration is often characterized by negative frames, such as conflicts and threats to economic prosperity and cultural identity in migrant-receiving countries, linked to crime and security issues (Fengler 2021, 100).

In operational terms, both (re)conceptualization and (re)contextualization refer to (re)locating the concept/issue in question in the semantic field, on the one hand of the scientific discipline, on the other hand of the media. The essential differences between the processes of scientific (re)conceptualization and media (re)contextualization arise from the fact that they create *sui generis* epistemic systems to which they refer when they address (research or report on) specific issues. Epistemic systems are "social processes generating judgments of truth and falsity" (Koppl 2012), which accommodate social practices, procedures, institutions and/or patterns of interpersonal influence that affect forms and outcomes of holding-for-true of their members. Paramount examples of epistemic systems are formal institutions with publicly specified aims, rules, and procedures. These systems are nowadays accompanied by the rise of new informal systems, which transformed once passive audiences into the active online users (producers). This development, which is the results of the technological progress (the appearance of digital platforms, algorithmisation of online communication) and intensified competition for attention, contributed not only to the democratization of communication, but also to its de-professionalization in which the distinctions between knowledge, opinion and belief are blurring.

The epistemic systems of science and media have in common that they both have an explicit goal of promoting positive epistemic results (Goldman 2010), but despite this similarity and the fact that their fields of meaning may overlap to a certain extent, they also differ significantly in terms of their epistemic outcomes. Science is primarily aimed at creating new knowledge; it is

linked to the media and journalism when it comes to spreading scientific knowledge in society and forming opinions to gain public support. The promotion of scientific knowledge in the media can increase public trust in science and enable a more reliable articulation of opinions expressed in the media, which can lead to a more rational and informed public deliberation.

However, the interweaving of science and mass media, with media logic and attention seeking involved in the production of scientific knowledge, can also lower the epistemic standards of science (Weingart 2012). They used to consist exclusively of criteria of scientific verification and validation, such as peer-reviewed publication, in a seemingly self-sufficient cognitively emancipated process, independent of external biases, although science was always dependent on “external” interests developed in other spheres of society. The current complementation of the criteria of scientific validity with the researcher’s ability to attract public attention and the media visibility of scientific achievements, imposed by media-applied criteria of newsworthiness that dominate agenda setting and news framing, is an enhanced continuation of such negative influence. An even greater danger of the deprofessionalization of science is the adoption of broadly important scientific topics by social media, because by subordinating knowledge to human beliefs, the rational foundations of science and trust in it are weakened (in Table 1, the main epistemic outputs of the three systems are marked with ☼).

Table 1. Epistemic systems, agents and their core outcomes

EPISTEMIC SYSTEMS / AGENTS	MODES OF EPISTEMIC OUTCOMES								
	Knowledge			Opinion			Belief		
	Production	Evaluation	Dissemination	Production	Evaluation	Dissemination	Production	Evaluation	Dissemination
Scientists	☼	☼	☼	☼					
Media/ journalists			☼	☼	☼	☼	☼		
Online social networks						☼	☼	☼	☼

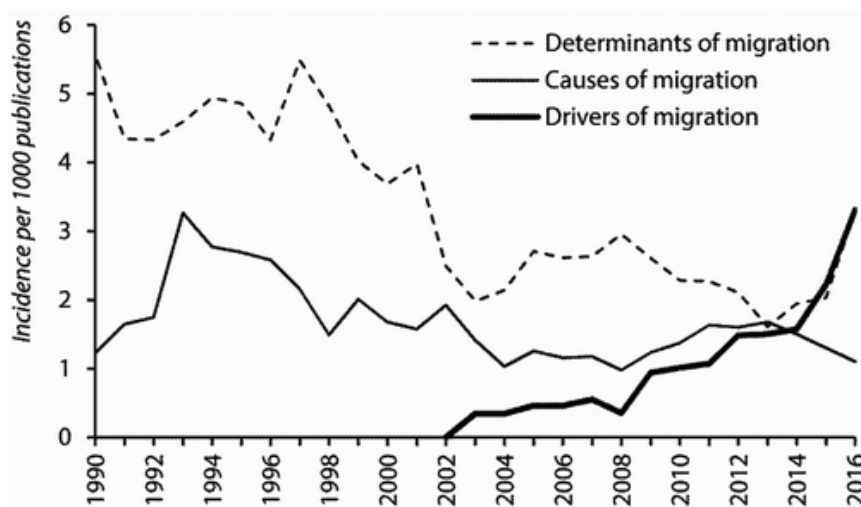
Given the differences between the scientific and journalistic epistemic systems, it is not realistic to expect that, despite methodological similarities in operationalization with key words, scientific (re)conceptualization and media (re)contextualization of migration could significantly overlap in their epistemic outcomes in the form of knowledge, opinions and beliefs that they produce, evaluate and promote.

In examining the forces that create and inhibit migration, migration studies offers many examples of attempts to rethink and reconceptualize specific migration phenomena at different levels of analysis from the individual to international, including the generic term “migration” itself. Massey et al. (1993) compiled different perspectives on the study of migration, reflecting

different research objectives, focuses, methodologies and interests. As they argue, “there is no single, coherent theory of international migration, only a fragmented set of theories that have developed largely in isolation from one another, sometimes but not always segmented by disciplinary boundaries” and employing “radically different concepts, assumptions, and frames of reference” (p. 432).

We do not intend to analyze historical trends and milestones in the study of migration, but only to exemplify the occurrence of theoretical reconceptualizations, from which our assumption about reconceptualizations of migration in public discourse and the media as a reflection of theoretical reconceptualizations and recontextualizations is derived.

Figure 1. Frequency of selected analytical terms in academic publications on migration (Source: Carling and Collins 2018)



Notes: Based on Scopus. Numbers refer to publications that use the respective term in their title, abstract keywords. The denominator is the total number of publications that refer to migration. All numbers are restricted to publications in the social sciences. Graphs are based on sliding averages.

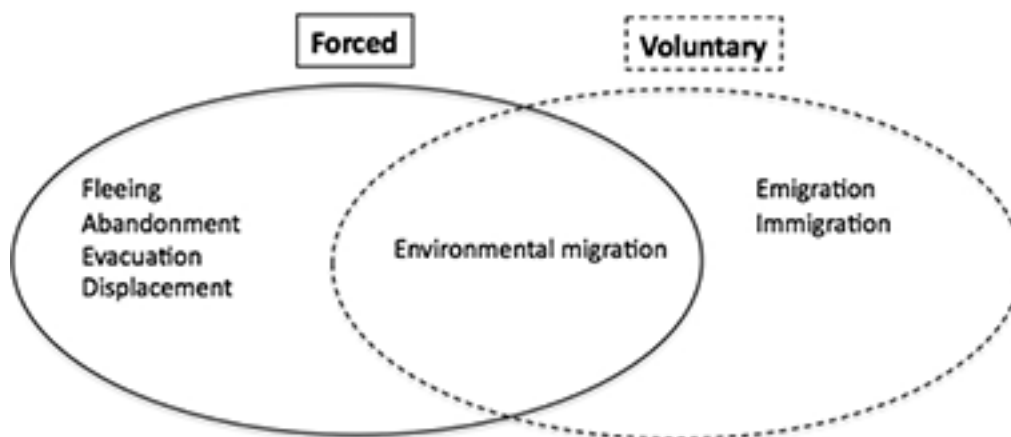
In recent decades, theories in migration studies have moved away from explaining migration by objectivist push and pull factors towards more complex explanatory approaches. Specifically, transnational approaches stimulated analysis of migration beyond looking at migration as a single linear process and migrants within either “sending” or “receiving” nation states as distinct social-geographical entities. Post-objectivist approaches go beyond neoclassical macro- and microeconomic theory and historical-structural approaches to migration focused on labor markets and the “new economics of labor migration” arguing that “migration may set in motion a development dynamic, lessening production and investment constraints faced by households in imperfect market environments and creating income growth linkages” (Taylor 2003, 63; Abreu 2012). Against this background, critical shifts in migration studies introduced the concepts of “aspiration”, “desire” and “drivers of migration”. They conceptualize migration decisions not as actions of isolated individuals located in one place, but as collective decisions of larger units of related people, such as families or households, in which people situated in social fields that cross borders act together to increase collective income and reduce constraints and risks not necessarily associated with labor market. This shift

is well evident in the dominant vocabularies, which tend to attribute greater explanatory power to the “drivers” of migration, which have recently gained importance alongside the traditional “determinants” and “causes” (Carling and Collins 2018). Figure 1 illustrates this development through tracking citations of these three words in academic publications from 1990 to 2016.

Drivers are hypothesized as complex forces that lead to the initiation of migration and sustain it over time but preclude any a priori inference about causality or a mechanistic concept of action. The conceptualization of migration as the actual and potential mobility of individuals within a particular social context foregrounds human aspiration and desire *for migration* and aspiration and desires *pursued through migration*. Without any particular theoretical intent, Carling and Collins (2018) identified 15 words that were frequently – and often casually – used in analyses of potentiality in migration in the 2010s: aspiration, desire, dream, expectation, hope, imaginaries, imagining, intention, limbo, prospects, risk, stuckness, uncertainty, waiting, and yearning. While aspiration and desire refer to actors, drivers of migration reflects analysis by an outside observer, i.e. the relation of others to mobile or potentially mobile actors. Migration studies should help to understand when and why particular drivers are more influential and/or more susceptible to change through external interventions in different social contexts and at different levels of aggregation than others.

Different conceptualizations and explanations of migration not only provided theoretical basis for policy studies and various (im)migration policies, but also shaped public discourse, especially in the mass media. The importance of *public discourse* on migration is clearly indicated by the fact that the annual number of social-scientific publications on migration has grown more than tenfold during the period from 1990 to 2016 (Carling and Collins 2018). For example, in *Discourse & Society*, a leading international peer-reviewed journal specializing in “research at the boundaries of discourse analysis and the social sciences”, for example, in the last 15 years (2007-2022), one third of all news (227 out of 726) have referred to “migration”, “immigration”, “migrant” or “refugee”.

Figure 2. Overlapping the semantic fields in which migrants (“voluntary migrants”) and refugees (“forced migrants”) are located in the case of environmental migration (from: Upadhyay et al 2015)



In contrast to the recent emergence of new explanatory efforts, such as “drivers of migration”, the conceptual distinction between migrants and refugees, which are conceptualized in fundamentally different ways, has a longer tradition. Its specificity is perhaps

primarily in the fact that it is not only theoretically but also strongly ideologically defined, especially when it comes to “refugees as a weapon”. Refugee studies are significantly different from the topics central to more voluntary phenomena in migration studies, such as labor-market migration. They are focused on the experiences of people affected by transnational processes of forced migration. Not surprisingly, for example, Cooper, Blumell and Bunce (2021) found that people who arrived to the UK from the Middle East and North Africa were more likely to be portrayed as “refugees” than migrants who arrived from Europe. The definition of a refugee varies considerably within the discipline, from a very narrow definition of the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which grants refugee status on the basis of “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion”, to more flexible contemporary definitions.¹

Specifically, the concept of “refugees as a weapon” is conceived of as the forced mass exodus of refugees from their own or a third country (such as the case of Belarus in 2021, which organized the sending of Arab refugees to Poland) to a hostile country with the intention of causing harm to the target country. In contrast, the concepts of “environmental migration” and “climate refugees” cause more confusion and climate migrants who must flee their homeland to save their lives in fear of the catastrophic consequences of climate change are often not considered refugees,² although climate migration is not only a matter of life and death but also concerns issues of political instability and conflict. Yet the legal definition of “refugee” does not cover individuals or groups of people who leave their country due to environmental reasons such as desertification or environmental hazards.

The general move towards multidimensional conceptualizations of migration and the global crises and trends generating migration in many different ways increase the need for a broader perspective on migration. Given the findings of numerous studies on the key “news factors” or “news values” that journalists weigh when deciding whether or not to cover an event (see Harcup and O’Neill 2016), it is unrealistic to expect the media to follow the trends of scientific reconceptualizations in their framing.

By challenging the assumption that media coverage of migration can be influenced by theoretical (re)conceptualizations and empirical (re)contextualizations of migration, in this paper we want to:

- (1) compare conceptual changes and trends in discourses about migrants and refugees in traditional and new media with the vocabulary of critical migration studies, and
- (2) identify specificities and differences between media vocabularies used in reporting (a) on the most prominent migrant events in the period from 2015 to 2022, and (b) on (im)migrants versus refugees in different contexts.

¹ The number of refugees has increased by a factor of ten from 1960 to 2016: from 170,000 in 1960 to 17.9 million in 2016 (Grubarov-Boskovic and Kalantaryan 2018, 31)

² According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), an annual average of 21.5 million people have been forcibly displaced by weather-related events – such as floods, storms, wildfires and extreme temperatures – since 2008. These numbers are expected to surge in coming decades with forecasts from international thinktank the IEP predicting that 1.2 billion people could be displaced globally by 2050 due to climate change and natural disasters. There could be 1.2 billion climate refugees by 2050. From *Zurich Magazine*, September 27, 2022. <https://www.zurich.com/media/magazine/2022/there-could-be-1-2-billion-climate-refugees-by-2050-here-s-what-you-need-to-know>

Methods

The analysis draws on data collected by Event Registry, a global media monitoring system that includes more than 150,000 news sources in more than 40 languages (Event Registry 2023). Due to the rise of the Internet and the crisis of traditional media, it is difficult to define who or what complements or replaces the functions of traditional media (information dissemination, government control, providing space for public discussion, etc.). Therefore, a broad definition of media is used in the online environment. By using all available sources, including blogs, news aggregator websites, etc. (but excluding social media), the study provides more valuable information to identify specific patterns of discourse formation. The data included in the study is considered big data – a large amount of unstructured data that is not representative of a predefined population of entities and therefore not intended for inference or generalization from sample to population, e.g., to a population of (national) media or another type of communication organizations or any other entity, as can be done with survey data.

As the Event Registry platform's news sources are constantly expanding, the inclusion of a particular media source does not necessarily refer to the entire period since the beginning of data collection in 2014. In addition, Event Registry does not contain data from all media sources and/or all news items of a particular media source. Since the system retrieves news items through news feed technology, it only includes news sources that use this technology (Leban et al. 2014). Concept search in Event Registry for the period 1 January 2015 to 13 October 2022 yields 868,481,818 articles, where, for illustration coronavirus is mentioned in 72,099,437 of these, Donald Trump in 25,410,188 articles, Brexit in 4,632,538, Ukrainian crisis in 362,144 and Elections to the European Parliament in 250,007.

Country selection

The analysis of discourses related to migration is based on news from the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy, and Slovenia. These countries were chosen because they either play a central role in shaping EU policy and/or have different views on migrations and migration policy. Thus, some of them are considered destination countries (UK, Germany and France), countries on the external borders of the EU (Italy) and/or transit countries (France, Slovenia). The article also aims to explore whether and how these placements are reflected in online migration discourses.

Selection of keywords and observational time period

The terms used to refer to people in (the context of) migration differ, sometimes significantly, in the languages of the countries studied. The vocabulary revolves around the key terms, i.e. refugee, migrant, immigrant, asylum seeker, and illegal immigrant, which are present to a greater or lesser extent in all the countries/languages studied. In some cases, these are complemented by additional language-specific terms denoting people with a migration background, such as “Einwanderer” or “Zuwanderer” in German and “prebežnik” in Slovene. A complete list of keywords is presented in Appendix 1.

The population of news for analysis was created on the basis of specific keywords in the selected time period using the Event Registry search engine. The search procedure used words denoting the phenomena (i.e. migration) and people in singular and plural forms (i.e. migrant and migrants). In Slovene language, all inflectional forms of words constituted the search

criteria. The period of analysis covers the time span from January 1, 2015, to October 13, 2022. Unfortunately, between October 15, 2019, and December 31, 2019, technical problems occurred that resulted in the system's inability to retrieve data, which was reflected in the form of empty gaps in illustrated charts.

News containing refugees represented 1,3 percent out of all 50,003,126 news items published and contained in ER in the selected period in Germany, and the same percent in Slovenia (2,942,856 in total), 0,8 percent in France (total 25,728,920), 0,6 percent in the UK (42,186,817 in total) and 0,4 percent in Italy (21,973,653 in total).

The number of media outlets tracked by the Event Registry varies over time, but information on the number of tracked media outlets in specific time periods and their share in relation to all media in a particular country or language community is not available. As the sample of migration news recorded by the ER cannot be considered representative of each individual country included in the analysis, the findings cannot be generalized to an individual country, nor can frequency distributions be directly compared between countries.

Visual representations are created based on absolute and relative frequencies of appearance. The absolute frequencies of news containing specific terms indicate the prominence of news coverage in specific time periods and point to specific important events in the analyzed period, while the relative frequencies of the analyzed terms provide additional insight into the relationship between the analyzed terms and media coverage. The selection of the peaks followed the logic of the highest daily frequency of articles containing a given term. The daily peaks indicate the importance that the media attribute to a particular event, although the daily frequencies also include news items that may be associated with other events. Included in the brief descriptions of daily peaks are events that have been identified and ranked by ER based on their relevance - number of news items that refer to the same event.

Results

Scientific vs. journalistic conceptualization

In order to identify conceptual changes and trends in media discourses related to migration, the analysis identifies structural and dynamic features of media coverage throughout the analyzed period by examining the prominence of various terms that denote people on the move. The dynamic features are reflected in the temporal distribution of news containing the selected terms and indicate key periods and events in the media coverage. In addition, special attention was paid to the media coverage of two migration compacts adopted at the time of our analysis: the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCSORM), adopted in Marrakech, Morocco on 10 December 2018, and the Global Compact for Refugees (GCR), adopted by the UN General Assembly on 19 December 2018.

The conceptualization of migration as the actual and potential mobility of individuals from one social environment to another is believed to depend on a specific epistemic framework or epistemic agent. Our analysis of media coverage of migration is not based on the analysis of migration theorizations and scientific (re)conceptualizations of migration briefly discussed in the introduction. Science is a specific epistemic system that contributes to shared understandings of reality by producing, evaluating and promoting specific knowledge, opinions, and beliefs in and for society. Although journalism is similar to science in that both are formal systems with publicly defined goals, rules, and procedures, they significantly differ

in terms of epistemic outcomes. The core mission of both systems is to raise its community's level of possession of truth by producing and providing or promoting knowledge, and more or less justified or rational opinion and belief. At the same time, the primary goal of journalism is to maximize user attention, rather than produce knowledge, thus it represents a relativistic epistemology competing with other systems, which competes with other systems in producing epistemic outcomes. Understood in this way, reconceptualization is an epistemic outcome characteristic of the scientific system, which nevertheless (may) also have characteristic consequences for other formal systems, such as journalism (see Table 1).

Table 2. Relative frequencies of terms indicating the reconceptualization of migration applied in the analyzed news (in percentages, Jan. 1. 2015 – Nov. 17. 2022; source Event Registry)

	Aspiration	Desire	Dream	Expectation	Hope	Imaginary	Imagining	Intention	Limbo	Prospects	Risk	Stuckness	Uncertainty	Waiting	Yearning
Refugee/s n=353,243	2	3	4	20	23	0	4	8	1	4	17	3	2	12	0
Migrant/s n=273,617	1	3	4	22	20	0	4	7	1	4	19	4	4	12	0

The idea of drivers as complex forces that lead to the initiation of migration and sustain it over time, is a typical example of a scientific reconceptualization that might be expected to influence other epistemic systems such as journalism. In our analysis, we wanted to determine whether the main ideas of the reconceptualization of migration, which focus on “drivers of migration” as a departure from causality, or the mechanistic concept of migration as an action, also appear in media discourses. In order to test whether the coverage of migrants and refugees follows or at least takes into account the theoretical reconceptualization, we investigated whether (and to what extent) the news about refugees and migrants contain any of the 15 terms that Carling and Collins identified as indicators of reconceptualization that attributes greater explanatory power to the “drivers” of migration: aspiration, desire, dream, expectation, hope, imaginaries, imagining, intention, limbo, prospects, risk, stuckness, uncertainty, waiting, and yearning (Table 2). Due to terminological problems, the analysis was limited to news published in Great Britain in the English language, a total 42,723,024 of news in the period Jan. 1. 2015 – Nov. 17. 2022.

The analysis shows that in the case of the (re)conceptualization of migration, it is possible to detect epistemic radiation across the boundaries of the scientific into the journalistic system, although it is not very strong. Among all indicators of changes in the conceptualization of migration defined by Carling and Collins, the most represented in media coverage worldwide are *hope* (found in 23 percent of news referring to refugees and 20 percent of news referring to migrants), *expectation* (20/22 percent), *risk* (17/19 percent), and *waiting* (12 percent). All of the other 11 indicators appear in less than 10 percent of the news, with the lowest *yearning* found in less than one percent of the news. The inclusion of all 15 indicators in the media

discourse does not show variability depending on whether the news reported on “refugees” or “immigrants”, which indicates that both concepts are embedded in a similar semantic context and are not clearly differentiated conceptually.

Specific migration-related terms and events

The meaning of the various terms used to refer to people who have left their countries of origin is not value neutral; they carry inherent meaning that implies the rationalization and (de)legitimization of reasons for migration and thus expresses the level of readiness for their acceptance in transition and/or destination countries. The prominence of the key terms related to migration and trends in their use indicate that migration was referred to and contextualized differently in different countries during the analyzed period. Figures 3a-7b show that reporting on migration-related topics revolves around three main actors labeled as “refugees”, “migrants”, and “immigrants”. Due to the different number of media outlets that exist in a country and those tracked by the Event Registry, however, the data cannot be considered representative of the countries and a direct (statistical) comparison between countries is not possible.

Table 3. Number of news items containing specific term in the analyzed period, Jan. 1. 2015 – Oct. 13 2022

	UK	Germany	France	Italy	Slovenia
Refugee	255,683	653,959	193,914	88,058	38,137
Migrant	282,694	208,011	245,604	260,888	55,572
Immigrant	322,187	47,599	153,917	132,803	1,274
Asylum seeker	59,182	275,069	37,260	43,464	6,859
Illegal/irregular migrant	13,040	122,125	8,337	950	3,388
Economic migrant	5,414	12,430	3,012	3,498	1,124
Einwanderer	<i>n/a</i>	89,276	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>
Zuwanderer	<i>n/a</i>	87,206	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>
Prebežnik	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	7,855

A country-by-country comparison of the number of news items containing a specific term (Table 3) reveals that the use of the term “immigrant/s” was the most prominent in the British news, while this term was almost absent from the migration-related vocabularies of the German and Slovenian media. In Germany, the most common terms used to denote people on the move in the media discourse were “refugee” (orig. *Flüchtling* or *Geflüchtete*) and “asylum seeker” (orig. *Asylbewerber*, *Asylantragsteller* or *Asylsuchende*) rather than “immigrant” (*Immigrant*, *Immigrantin*). In the media in all other analyzed countries, the use of the term “migrant” (and “immigrant” in the case of Italy) was more common in the media than the use of the word “refugee”. However, in contrast to the other analyzed countries, the use of the term “illegal migrant” was relatively more frequent in Germany and partly in Slovenia. With the exception of Germany, the terms “illegal (im)migrant”, “economic migrant” and “asylum seeker” played a minor role in media discourses.

News stories reporting migration-related issues were mostly focused on “immigration” or “immigrants” in the UK, with 322,187 news items, followed by news reporting “migration” or “migrants” (282,694), while “refugee(s)” were mentioned in 255,683 news items. In the Slovenian media, the third most common term in reporting on migrants was “prebežnik” (defector), which generally refers to someone who has abandoned their country or cause in favor of the opposite (e.g. deserter), thus emphasizing someone’s transitivity, but also points to specific features of a particular language.

Refugees or (im)migrants

That “migrants” and “refugees” are placed in very similar semantic contexts in media coverage is shown by the fact that about 40 percent (100,903) of articles in the United Kingdom that refer to refugees also refer to migrants.

Table 4. Media vocabularies: Top 15 keywords associated with “refugees” and “migrants” in media reporting³

Terms related to MIGRANTS	Terms related to REFUGEES
Immigration	Immigration
Refugee	Refugee camp
Migrant worker	Right of asylum
Human migration	European migrant crisis
Right of asylum	Asylum seeker
Coronavirus	Human rights
European migrant crisis	Terrorism
Asylum seeker	Humanitarian aid
Illegal immigration	Human migration
Human rights	Coronavirus
Mexico–U.S. border	Deportation
Deportation	Humanitarianism
Presidency of Donald Trump	Muslim
Smuggling	English language
Euro	Internally displaced person

The term “refugee” was the most prominent term used by the media in the news during the so-called first migration-refugee wave to Europe in the autumn 2015, particularly in the UK (Figure 3a), Germany (Figure 4a) and to some extent in France (Figure 5a) and Slovenia (Figure 7a), but not in Italy (Figure 6a). The term “migrant” was most commonly used already during the “first refugee wave” in autumn 2015 in France and Slovenia, and during the “second refugee wave” in the UK. Afterwards, there is a gradual decrease in news referring to “refugees” in the media discourse, and gradual increase in the use of the term “migrant” (particularly in France and Slovenia) and “immigrants” (UK). The number of news items using the term “refugee” gradually declined in the UK media since 9 September 2015 (619 news) to the second peak representing the “second wave” (14 January 2016: 562), with a rapid rise and immediate fall following Trump’s Muslim immigration ban on 30 January 2017 (UK 1,042 (633 on 29 January,

³ Due to a large number of results Event Registry identifies the top concepts on a subset of articles.

688 on January 31), France 459 (286 on 29 January, 254 on January 31); Slovenia 75 news items (55 on 29 January, 56 on January 31)).

Figure 3a. The most prominent events according to the number of news containing migration related concepts in the UK media between January 1, 2015 and October 13, 2022, (n=938,251)

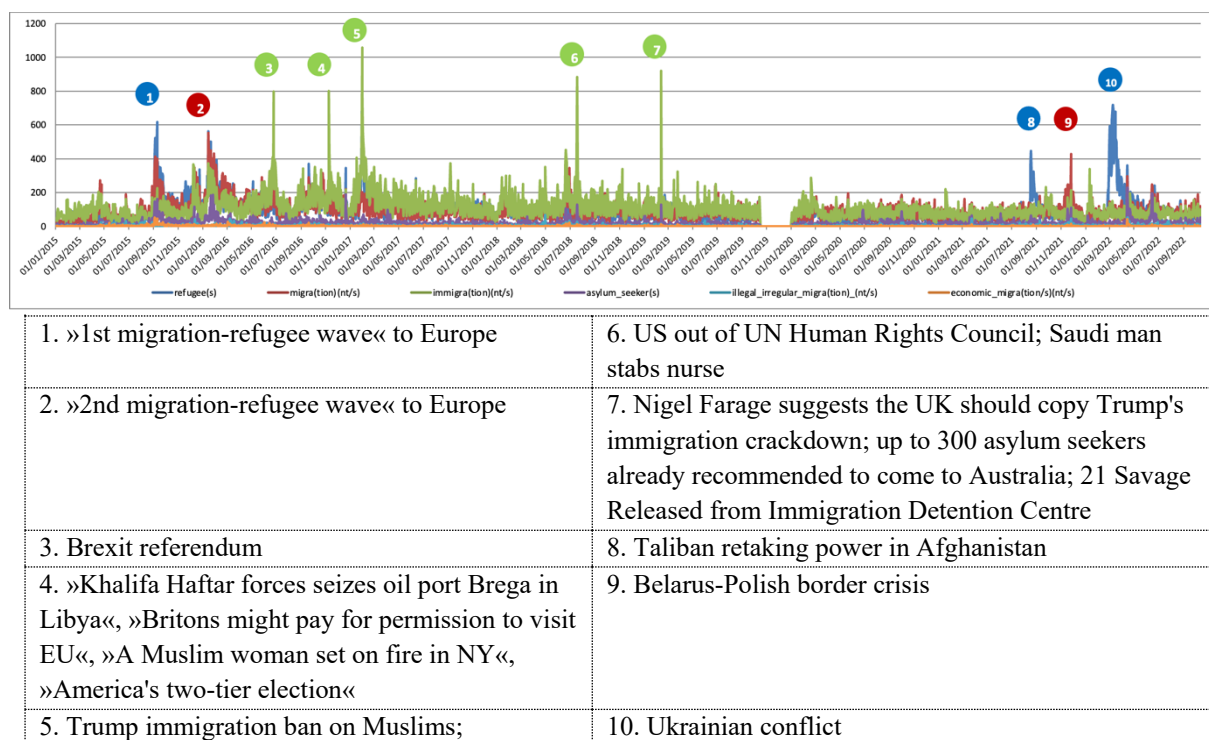
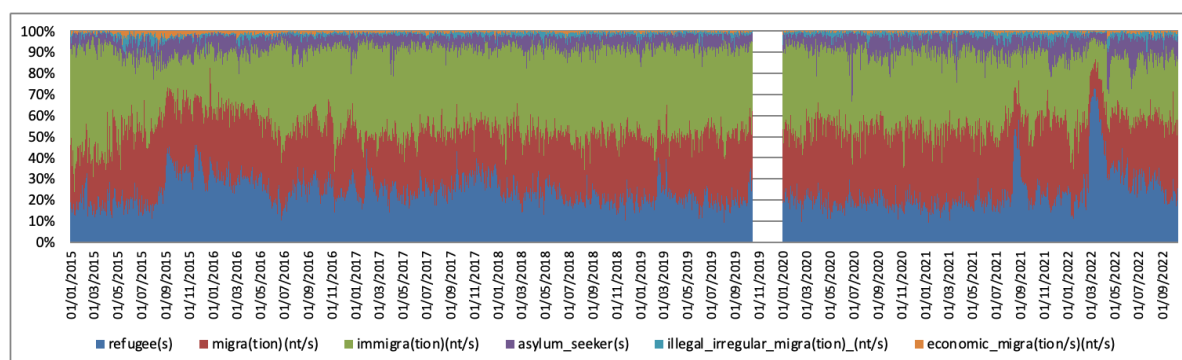


Figure 3b. Relative frequencies of news stories containing migration-related concepts in the UK media between 1 January 2015 and 13 October 2022

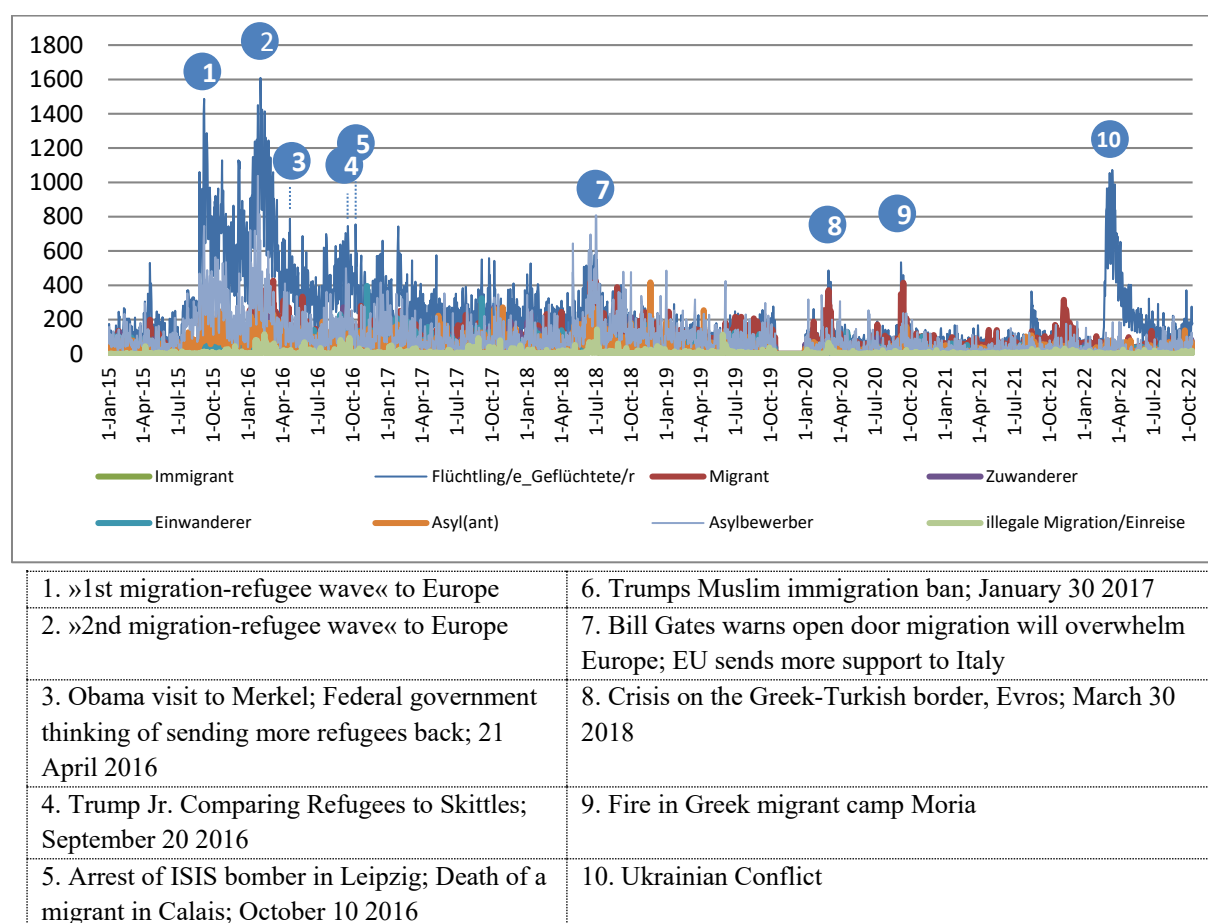


On the other hand, the references to “migrants” gradually became more prominent, especially during the “second refugee wave” (spring 2016) and during the crisis on the Belarusian-Polish border (winter 2021), and prevailed over the use of alternative terms.

On 24 June 2016, the day after the Brexit referendum vote, the increase in news stories in the UK media that included terms derived from “immigrant” peaked at 799 news stories (12.2 per cent of daily news published in the UK; Figure 3a), which is one of the highest daily peaks of (im)migration news in the entire analyzed period in the British media

Apart from the period of the “European migrant crisis”, the term “immigrant” continued to dominate the British media until the re-take of power in Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021, and especially with the Ukraine crisis at the end of February 2022, which brought the term “refugee” back into the media discourse. In contrast, people who were caught and forcibly brought to the Belarusian-Polish border were clearly labeled as “migrants”. Similar patterns were found in the French and to some extent in the Italian media (Figures 5a and 6a).

Figure 4a. The most prominent events according to the number of news containing migration-related concepts in the German media between 1 January 2015 and 13 October 2022, (no. of news items: 1,531,501)



The discourse in the German media did not follow the same patterns as in the UK. The media vocabulary used in the reporting of issues related to migration mainly revolved around the terms “Flüchtling” or “Geflüchtete” (also in the plural form) and “Asylbewerber”, which led to a distinctive peak on 2 July 2018, during the so called “Migrationstreit” (*Süddeutsche Zeitung* 2018) or “Asylstreit” (*Die Welt* 2018) in the German coalition government. Significant for the German (media) vocabulary is the absence of the terms “Immigrant” and “Migrant”, “Asylant” (asylum seeker), “illegale Migrant”, which appear very rarely in the media.

Figure 4b. Relative distribution of news containing migration-related concepts in the German media between 1 January 2015 and 13 October 2022

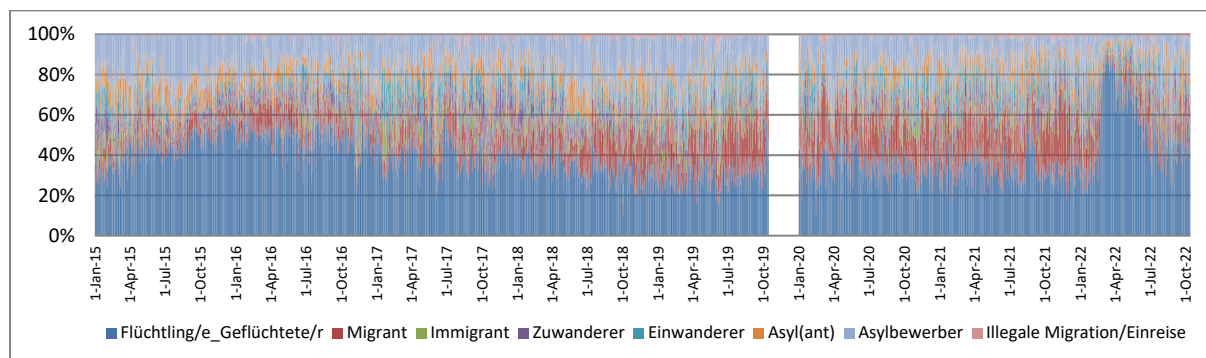
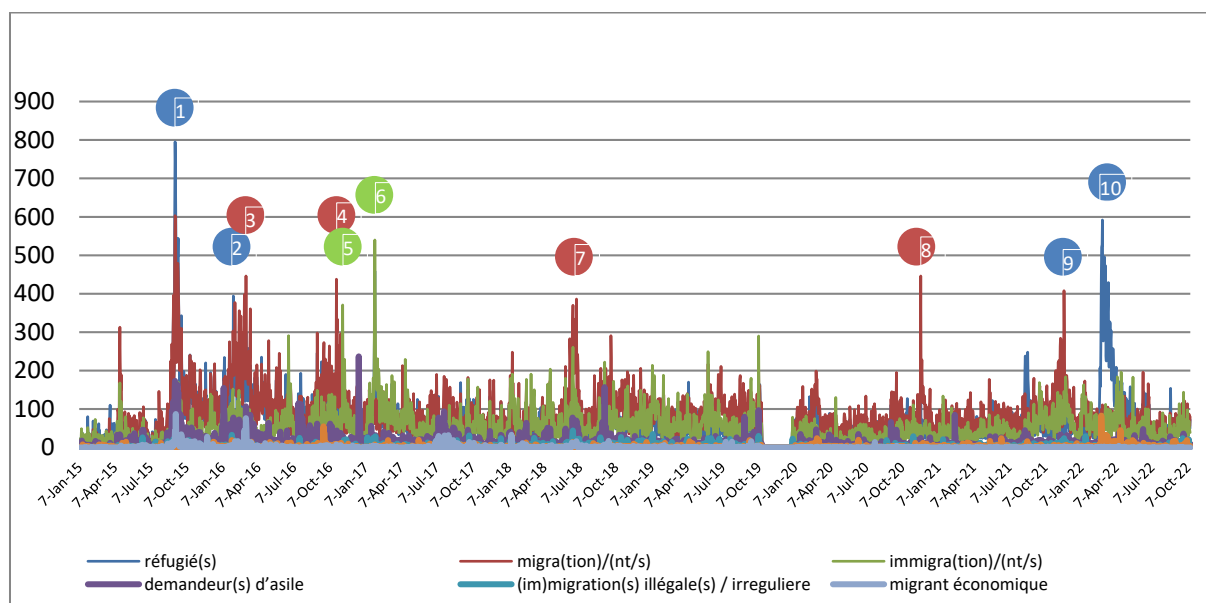
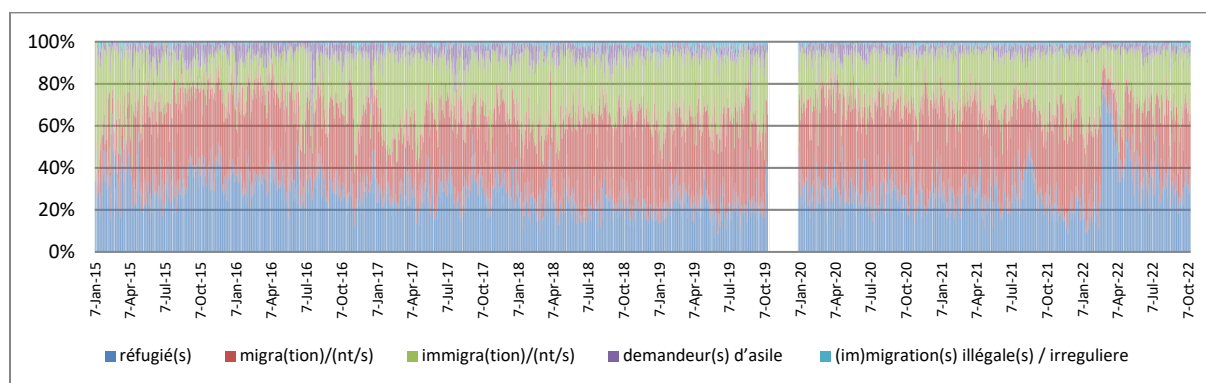


Figure 5a. The most prominent events according to the number of news containing migration-related concepts in the French media between 1 January 2015 and 30 September 2022 (no. of news: 642,044)



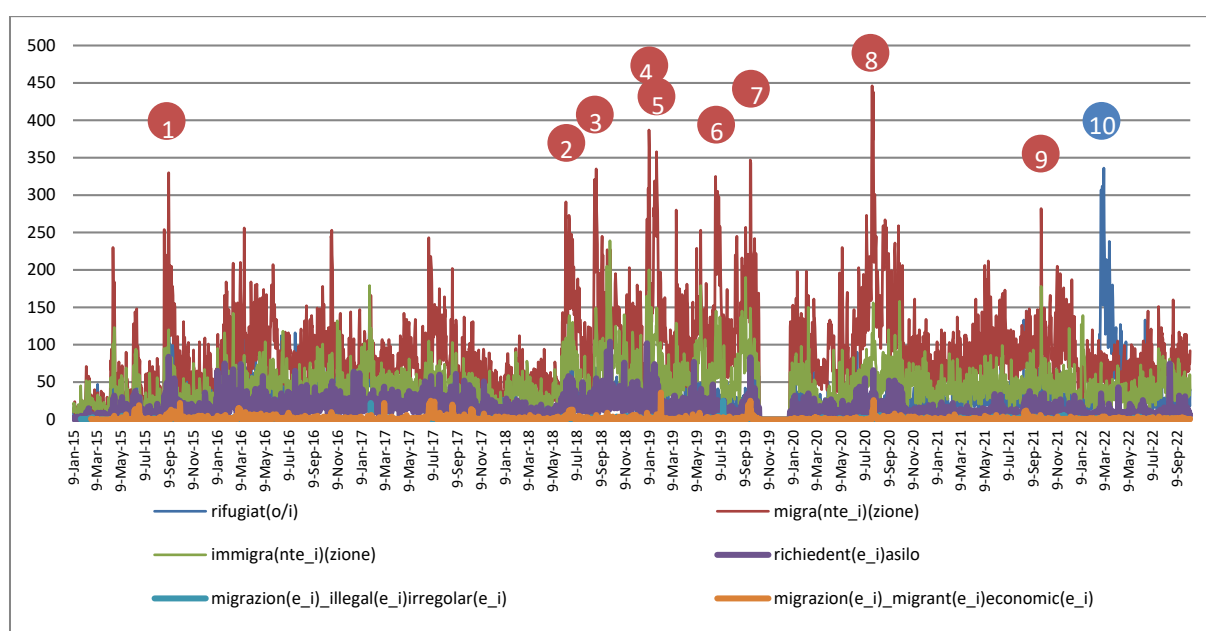
1. »1st migration-refugee wave« to Europe	6. Trumps Muslim immigration ban (Jan. 30, 2017)
2. »2nd migration-refugee wave« to Europe – »Turkey fears a new influx of 600,000 Syrian refugees at its border« (8. Feb. 2016)	7. »100 people feared dead after migrant boat capsizes off coast of Libya«; »Bulgarian Prime Minister: Close Europe's Borders, Imprison Illegals, Deport Them Back to Africa« (29. Jun 2018)
3. »EU plans to allow Turkey's 77 million citizens to travel without visas« (7. Mar. 2016)	8. »Police breaking up refugee camp in Paris« (Nov. 24. 2020)
4. »Marks and Spencer, Asos, Zara, Mango: Syrian refugees exploited in their Turkish workshops«, »3,800 refugees, including Syrians, drowned in Mediterranean on their way to Europe in one year« (24. Oct. 2016)	9. Belarus-Polish border crisis (25. Nov. 2021)
5. »Calais Jungle closed: Hundreds of children remain unaccounted for despite official closure« (9. Nov. 2016)	10. Ukrainian conflict (3. Mar. 2022)

Figure 5b. Relative distribution of news containing migration -related concepts in the French media between 1 January 2015 and 13 October 2022



The most prominent events in most of the analyzed countries were international events, such as those related to the first and second migration-refugee wave to Europe, Trump's immigration ban, the Taliban resumption of power in Afghanistan, the crisis on the Belarusian-Polish border, and the Ukrainian conflict. As Italy is located on the external border of the EU, the media agenda was clearly dominated by national events: apart from the Ukrainian crisis, the eight most prominent peaks in media coverage were related to national events and revolve around the use of the term “migrant”.

Figure 6a. The most prominent events according to the number of news items containing migration-related concepts in the Italian media from 1 January 2015 to 30 September 2022 (no. of news items: 557,830)

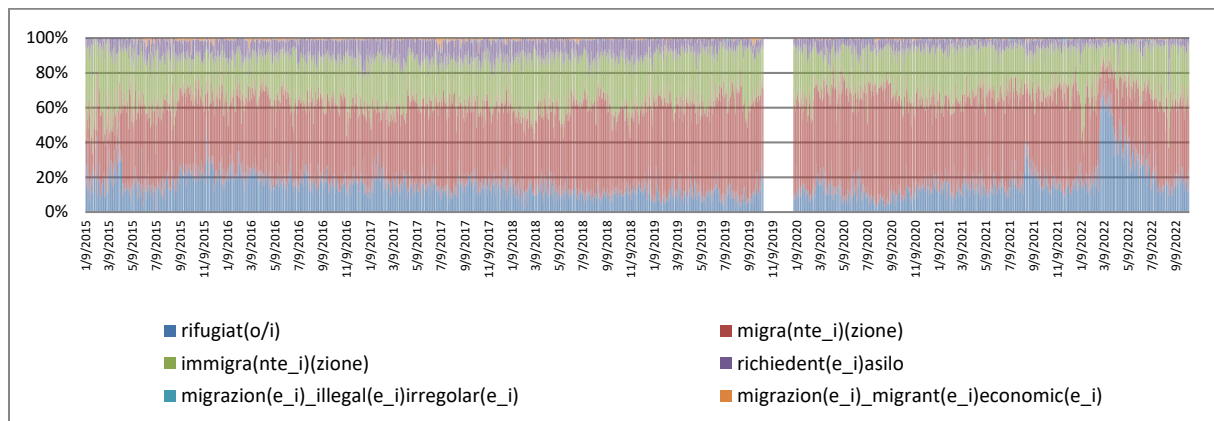


1. »1st migration-refugee wave« to Europe (8. Sep. 2015)
2. Giuseppe Conte to cancel the trip to Paris over quarrel about Aquarius rescuing boat (12. Jun. 2018)

6. »Sea Watch« blockade (27. Jun.2019)
7. »Malta agreement on migrants« (24. Sep. 2019)

3. »Spoleto, hospital doctor on Fb: “Migrants should be drowned offshore”«, »2-year-old boy dies on a Beirut-Rome flight« (28. Aug. 2018)	8. »Migrants, alarm in Lampedusa« (28. Jul. 2020)
4. »Conte welcomes 15 migrants from NGOs. Salvini opposes«, “Controversy over San Remo director Claudio Baglioni over his words on migrants during the Festival« (9. Jan. 2019)	9. »Belarusian-Polish border crisis«, » <i>Save the Children</i> report« (30. Sep. 2021)
5. »Italian government grants humanitarian corridors for “Sea Watch” to allow a transfer to Holland” (28. Jan. 2019)	10. Ukrainian Conflict (8. Mar. 2022)

Figure 6b. Relative distribution of news containing migration-related concepts in the Italian media between 1 January 2015 and 13 October 2022)



While there seems to be a period of relatively less media attention to migration-related topics in the UK, Germany and France in the middle of the analyzed period, media attention to migration remained considerable in the EU peripheral countries. The periods with the highest number of news on migration in Italy and Slovenia were in the years 2018-2020. While in the case of Italy the most prominent events were of national origin, the events in the Slovenian media were related to the developments on the Balkan route. Among the most important reported events was the extraordinary session of the Slovenian Parliament on the “Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration” on November 21, 2018.

Figure 7a. The most prominent events according to the number of news items containing migration-related concepts in the Slovenian media from 1 January 2015 to 30 September 2022 (no. of news: 114,209)

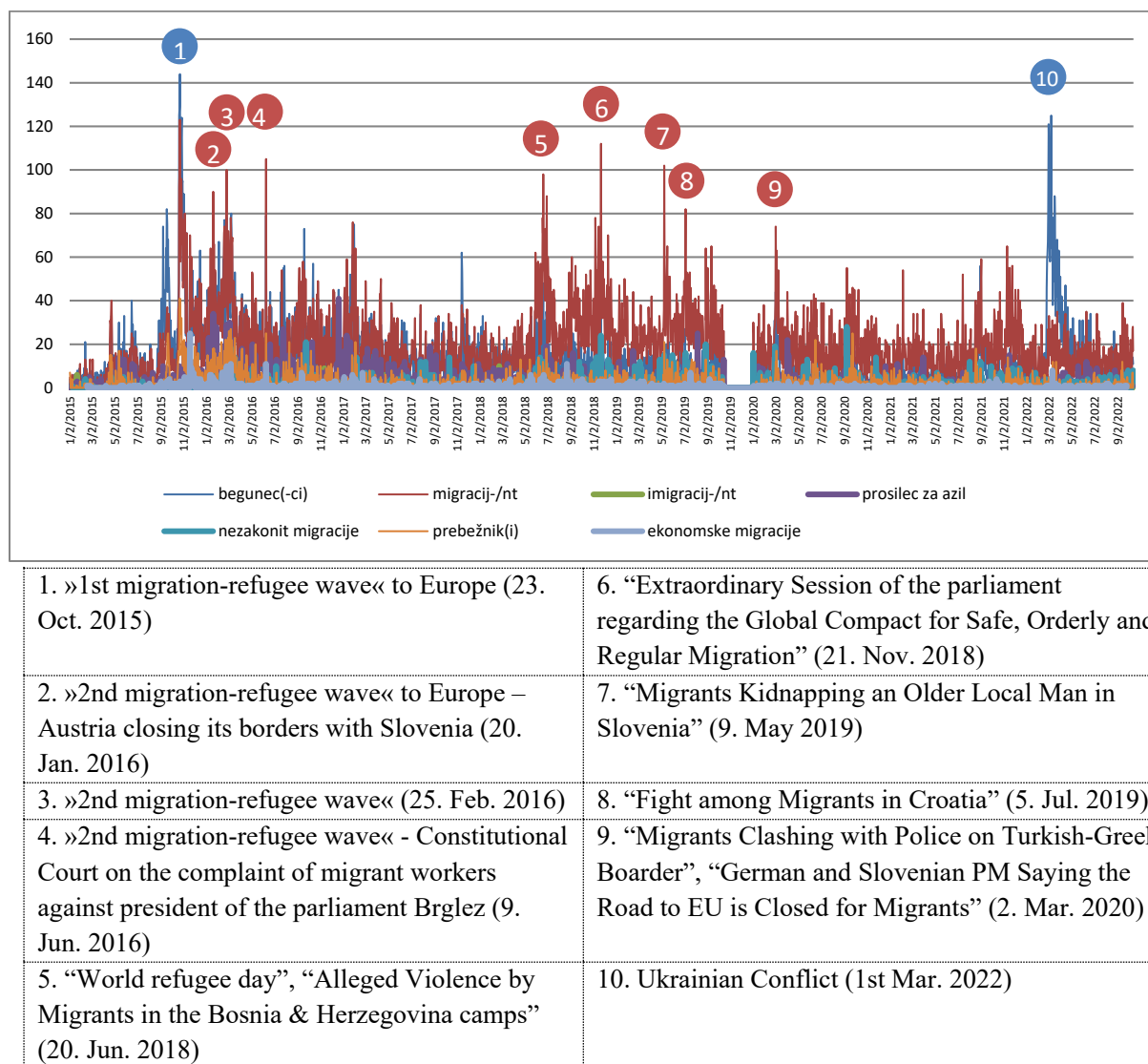
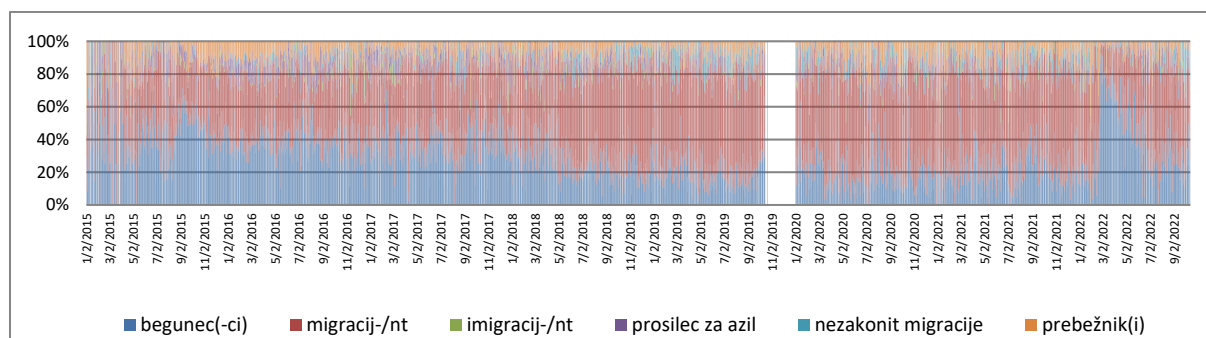


Figure 7b. Relative distribution of news items containing migration related concepts in the Slovenian media, between 1 January 2015 and 12 October 2022⁴

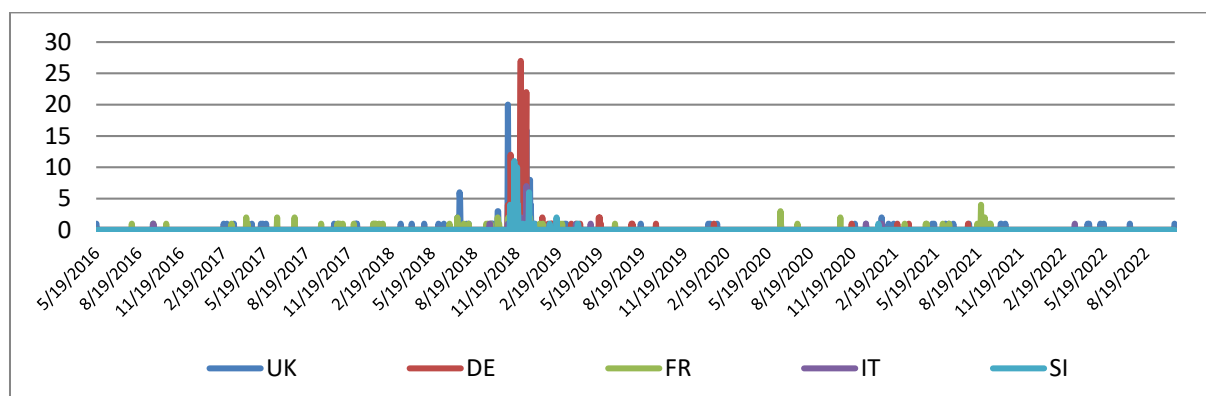


The (Non-)prominence of the Adoption of Two Migration Compacts in the National Media

Searching for the exact term The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCSORM) (and translated in the languages analyzed) revealed a total of 187 news items published in the United Kingdom, 233 in Germany, 92 in France, 26 in Italy, and 55 in Slovenia (Figure 8). The compact received relatively little media attention which was largely limited to the time before its adoption (10 December 2018), with the highest numbers of articles being published from 31 October to 16 December, shortly before the adoption of the second compact analyzed, the Global Compact for Refugees (GCR), by the UN General Assembly on 19 December. After this date the two compacts were mentioned seldomly in the media (no more than 4 news per day), indicating a very limited impact on the media discourse on migration. Event Registry identified 155 news items in British media mentioning migrants or migration on the day of GCSORM's adoption, 10 December 2018, which represents less than one percent of the news published that day (14,817). Among them, only 27 news articles (0.2 percent) mentioned Morocco or Marrakesh, where the two international documents were voted on. By comparison, the highest peak in the analysis of 1,058 news reporting (largely) on Trump's executive order banning Muslim immigrants from entering the U.S. on 30 January 2017 accounted for 7.65 percent of all news published in the U.K. that day.

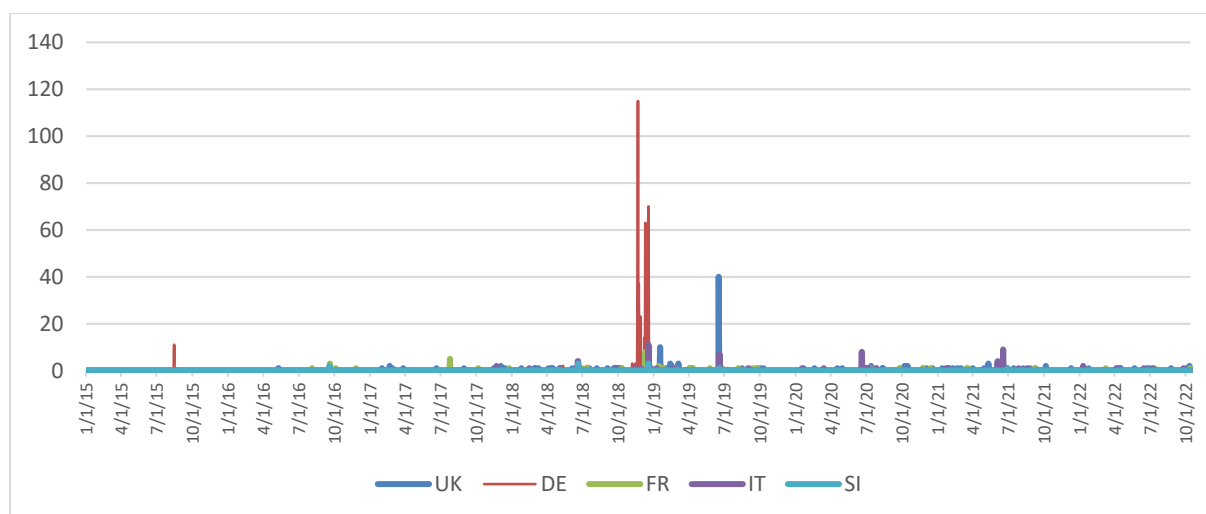
⁴ Due to low frequency (n=85) of the term »economic migrant« (orig. ekonomski migrant) in Slovenian news in the analysed period, the term was excluded from the visualisation chart.

Figure 8. Distribution of news about Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in the five analyzed countries throughout the analyzed period (n = 593)



According to the number of news containing certain search terms, the media paid more attention to the Global Compact on Refugees adopted on 18 December 2018. Based on data from ER, the term search revealed a total of 194 news in the United Kingdom, 588 in Germany, 70 in French media, 76 in Italian and 12 in Slovenian media outlets.

Figure 9. Distribution of news referring to Global Compact on Refugees in five countries in the analyzed period (n=940)



The GCR received the greatest media coverage in the German media on 21 November 2018 (115 news items) and with 70 news covering the event on the day of its adoption (Dec. 18 2018), followed by the Italian media (11 news items), the British media (4), and the French media (2). In the Slovenian media, no article on a specific day was found under this search term on ER. The British media paid more attention to the GCR on 17 June 2019 (40 news) than on the day of its adoption, citing the statement by British MP Sajid Javid that the UK planned to resettle 5,000 refugees in 2020.

Conclusion

In the study reported in this paper, we used the Event Registry news intelligence platform for a contextual insight into how the media around the world perceived and reported migration and refugees in the period from 2015 to 2022. The study was mainly focused on five selected countries during the periods of the strongest waves of the European migration crisis and the adoption of international agreements for their (political) solution. We aimed to find out whether we are witnessing an increasing content similarity or diversification of migration-related news in five different countries and languages.

Overall, our study shows that *empirical contextualizations* have a more significant impact on media coverage of migration than *theoretical conceptualizations*. In other words, theoretical reconceptualizations generated in the study of migration do not have a significant impact on the way migration is reported in the media, but other (news) factors or values arising from specific social contexts are more important. When we used the indicators of changes in the conceptualization of migration defined by Carling and Collins (2018), we found that conceptual innovations in migration research are only weakly present in media coverage of migration around the world. This finding is consistent with the belief that the epistemic spaces of different epistemic systems and epistemic agents (e.g., migration studies vs. journalism) are by definition distinctly different from each other and only partially overlap.

Reporting on migration is situated primarily in a national political context, echoing its key issues at the time. Italy could be presented as an example of how, due to the large number of immigrants, politics has used this topic in all discussions on political controversial issues. In general, journalistic coverage of migration focuses primarily on visible events or “facts” and their actors that can be visualized, rather than on conceptual issues and problem solving. Thus, it is not surprising that the most news about migration occurs during mass and/or politically important events, such as: first and second migration-refugee wave to Europe (October 2015 and January 2016), Trump’s Muslim immigration ban (January 2017), Taliban retaking power in Afghanistan (August 2021), Belarusian-Polish border crisis (September 2021), and Russian aggression in Ukraine in the spring of 2022.

For example, our analysis showed a relatively large amount of attention paid by the media in Slovenia to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration of November 2018. However, the reason for this was not the content of the Compact, but the fact that the Compact was discussed in the Slovenian parliament, and the Slovenian right-wing media took this discussion as a cue for a series of comments directed against migrants, presented as coming massively and illegally to Slovenia. An even more blatant example of media coverage dependent on “hard facts” was Trump’s January 17, 2017 executive order banning people from six Muslim-majority countries from entering the USA, and slamming the door on refugees, which sparked protests around the country at airports and resonated in all the media around the world.

While scientific and journalistic epistemic fields are very different, in some respects almost mutually exclusive, the concepts of “migrant” and “refugee” often overlap in journalistic discourse, which further corroborates the lack of a clear conceptualization of migration in the media. The distinction between “refugees” and “immigrants” also reflects national linguistic peculiarities. In some languages, the media prefer to use indigenous terms such as “Flüchtling”, “Geflüchtete” and “Asylbewerber” in German, rather than “international” terms “Immigrant”

or “Migrant” when reporting on migration. However, when we compared the sub-sample of news that reported on “migrants” with the sub-sample of news that reported on “refugees”, it turned out that in both cases the keywords associated with the two different types of migrants were very similar.

In general, the use of the term “migrant” was more common in the media than the use of the word “refugee”, but specifically the two terms are marked by a clear geopolitical difference. The term “refugee” was quite prominent in the news during the “first refugee wave” to Europe in the fall of 2015, but in the later period of analysis, there was a gradual increase in the use of the term “migrant” at the expense of the term “refugee”. This changed with the reporting of “refugees” from Ukraine due to Russian aggression. While those fleeing the catastrophic consequences of climate change, poverty, economic instability and political conflicts in Africa and the Middle East are often not considered refugees, but migrants, although it would be difficult to argue that they do not flee their homeland for “well-founded fear” for their lives, in the case of Ukraine it was difficult to overlook the “well-founded fear” for their lives. The ubiquitous homogenous media classification of Ukrainian citizens who left their country because of the war as “refugees” is in stark contrast to the media coverage of “immigrants” coming to the European Union (and the UK) from non-European countries that are geographically and culturally further away from the EU than Ukraine.

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Appendix 1. Keywords used to compile a sample of relevant news in five languages in the Event Registry news intelligence platform, 2015-2022

	refugee	migrant	immigration	asylum seeker	illegal migration	economic migrants	other
UK (English)	refugee refugees	migrant migrants migration	immigrant immigrants immigration 2,173	asylum seeker asylum seekers	illegal / irregular migrant illegal / irregular migrants illegal / irregular migration	economic migrant economic migrants economic migration(s)	
Germany (German)	Flüchtling Flüchtlinge Geflüchteter Geflüchtete	Migrant Migrantin Migranten Migrationen Migration	Immigrant Immigrantin Immigranten Immigration	Asylbewerber Asylbewerberin Asylwerber Asylantragsteller Asylantragstellerin Asylantragstellers OR Asylsuchende Asylsuchender	illegale Migration illegale Migrationen illegale Migrant illegale Migrantin illegale Migrationen illegale Einreise illegale Einreisen	Migrant aus wirtschaftlichen Gründen Migranten aus wirtschaftlichen Gründen Migrantin aus wirtschaftlichen Gründen Wirtschaftsmigrant Wirtschaftsmigrantin Wirtschaftsmigranten Wirtschaftsmigrantinnen	Zuwanderung Zuwanderer Zuwanderin Zuwanderers Einwanderung Einwanderungen Einwanderer Einwanderinnen
France (French)	réfugié réfugiés	migration migrant migrants	immigration immigrant immigrants	demandeur d'asile demandeurs d'asile	immigration illégale immigrations illégales immigration irrégulière immigrations irrégulières	migrant économique migrants économiques migrations économiques migration économique	
Italy (Italian)	rifugiato rifugiati	migrante migranti migrazione	immigrazione immigrante immigranti	richiedente asilo richiedenti asilo	migrazione illegale migrazioni illegali migrazione irregolare migrazioni irregolari	migrante economico migranti economici migrazioni economici migrazione economica	sfollato sfollati

Slovenia (Slovene)	begunec begunca beguncu beguncem begunci beguncev begunce beguncih	migrant migrantu migranta migranti migrantov migrantom migrantih migracije migracij migracijah migracijam	imigrant imigrantu imigranta imigrante imigranti imigrantov imigrantom imigrantih imigracije imigracij imigracijah imigracijam	prosilec za azil prosilcu za azil prosilca za azil prosilci za azil prosilcev za azil prosilcem za azil prosilcih za azil	nezakonite migracije nezakonitih migracij nezakonitim migracijam nezakonitimi migracijami	ekonomski migrant ekonomskega migranta ekonomskemu migrantu ekonomskim migrantom ekonomski migranti ekonomskih migrantov ekonomskih migrantih ekonomski migranti ekonomske migracije ekonomskih migracij ekonomskim migracijam ekonomskimi migracijami	prebežnik prebežniki prebežnike prebežnikov prebežnikih prebežnikom prebežniku prebežnika
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