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*Media representation and civil society's
perception of the migration phenomenon in
Europe*

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Abstract

This paper analyses the influence of the media on civil society's perception of the migration phenomenon in Europe; it was developed as part of the Inclusive Europe project¹, co-financed by the European Commission under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF).

In particular, it analyses, on the one hand, the frames most frequently used by the media to narrate migration and, on the other, the main frames through which civil society actors interpret the phenomenon, with the aim of investigating possible correspondences or discrepancies between the two levels. To this end, a review of the relevant literature was conducted, while first-hand data was collected through an anonymous survey sent to members of seven EU civil society organisations.

As scholars indicate, two frames tend to prevail in media reports on migration: a dominant alarmist one and a less recurrent pietist one, both of which produce a doubly stereotyped image of the migrant, seen as a dehumanised, desperate but potentially threatening figure. This stereotypical representation has been shown to influence the attitudes and behaviour of the general public, but so far little has been said about the impact on specialised audiences, such as civil society organisations, despite their central role in promoting social cohesion and intercultural dialogue in Europe.

As the data show, the alarmist-securitarian frame is marginal in civil society's perception of migration, where the pietist-humanitarian one prevails. The latter can be particularly insidious, as it escapes awareness and can be more easily internalised and reused than the more explicit alarmist one. Civil society, given its sensitivity to the cause of migrants, is particularly exposed to this risk.

Moreover, in civil society's framing of the phenomenon, counter-narratives seem to emerge that present migration as an opportunity for the host society and a challenge in terms of integration and social coexistence. In both cases, migration regains depth and multidimensionality, as it extends beyond the topical phase of border crossing to also include the complexity of integration. The migrant also regains historicity and agency: they bear suffering and needs, but also resources and skills.

Last but not least, a certain awareness of media framing dynamics was detected among the civil society actors surveyed. In 16.7% of the cases – not a low percentage given the technicality of the issue – respondents reacted to the textual and visual contents proposed by the survey by explicitly attributing them to the pervasiveness of media and political discourse. Civil society thus emerges as a sensitised public, whose sensitivity is not just a matter of human sympathy: they can rely on a solid thematic knowledge that sometimes supports them in a more critical reading of the issue.

1. Introduction

This publication aims at stimulating a critical reflection on the potential interference of the media with the attitudes and behaviours of specialised and sensitised audiences in relation to migrants. It focuses on European civil society organisations dealing with migration and integration. More specifically, the aim is twofold: on the one hand, to analyse the main models and frames adopted by the media in narrating facts related to migration and in portraying its protagonists (the migrants) in Europe, whose recent history has been deeply marked by a heated public debate on topics related to the arrival and presence of third-country nationals; on the other, to explore the main orientations in the perception of European civil society practitioners in relation to the migration phenomenon, with the ultimate objective to verify possible correspondences (and therefore plausible interconnections) with the most recurrent expressive and interpretative patterns reproduced by the media.

Further research would be needed to understand more clearly the mechanisms through (and assess the extent to) which information affects society and politics. However, there's no doubt that migration has been at the core of media attention during some of the main socio-political changes

¹ <https://www.inclusiveeu.com/>

over the last decade – e.g., the rise of populism and the Brexit referendum – in Europe, whose democracies rely on people’s opinions and civic participation. Therefore, a link exists between media reporting of social events and how the public interprets and reacts to them, which may translate into political choices. Scholarly literature – from a wide range of disciplines: media studies, social psychology, communication research, political psychology, etc. – has extensively analysed the media coverage of migration and its effects on public perceptions and behaviour, shedding light on the interconnection between the visibility, salience and framing of the migration phenomenon in the media landscape and the political discourse and public sentiment across Europe, particularly since the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015 (Erbel et al., 2018; Heidenreich et al., 2020). Moreover, it has pointed to migration as a privileged vantage point to observe the central role played by “the mass media as agents of societal discourse and political debate ... in increasingly mediated societies” (Lecheler et al., 2019, p. 692).

What has instead been neglected, or only partially addressed, by the relevant research is the influence of the media narratives of migration on specialised publics. While there is research on the interference of the media portrayal of migrant landings on the modus operandi of emergency personnel operating in border areas (Ieracitano & Vigneri, 2016), little, if any, attention has thus far been devoted to the possible effects on local civil society organisations, despite the central role that they play in promoting integration and intercultural dialogue in Europe. Moreover, they usually represent a highly sensitised public, composed of professionals with a keen social awareness, often sympathetic and supportive of migrants’ and refugees’ rights. Hence, the interest of this study in investigating whether and to what extent the media contribute to shaping their sensitivities and behaviour in relation to migration.

Taking the opportunity to collaborate with the European network of the Inclusive Europe project, the researcher involved the members of the seven partner civil society organisations in a survey aimed at understanding how they interpret the migration phenomenon and how their interpretation can be connected with the information on migration conveyed by the media. Specifically, 15 respondents (an average of two staff members per organisation) took part in the survey. The limited size of the sample, however, did not allow the study to come to exhaustive conclusions; rather, the intention was to initiate a critical reflection on the responsibilities of the media, whose constructed representations of social phenomena not only influence the general public, but also guide the way these phenomena are interpreted and dealt with by professionals who are actively involved in their management.

The empirical part is preceded by a theoretical framework, which is recreated in relation to the main and most recent research in the media and migration studies field. These have outlined the patterns, narrative styles and rhetoric recurring in the media representation of the phenomenon, allowing the present work to be contextualised. Like previous research, this study adopts a constructivist perspective, according to which reality – including phenomena like migration – is socially constructed (Berger & Luckman, 1966), and appreciates the cultural studies’ approach to the media as instruments that operate an ideological framing of reality itself (Hall, 1980). These theoretical premises allow us to consider the role of the media in producing and transmitting a stereotypical image of migration and the consequent repercussions in terms of attitudes and behaviour towards the migrants.

2. Media representation of migration

2.1 General overview of media and migration studies

The nexus between media and migration has gained prominence in scholarly literature over the past two decades. As previously mentioned, scientific interest in the topic has emerged from a

wide range of disciplines (media studies, social psychology, communication research, political psychology), which have investigated the role of the media – mainly mass media, with a focus on mainstream news outlets – in the politicisation of migration, particularly in Europe (Van der Brug et al., 2015). Specifically, as scholars point out, the media are not only instruments through which information on specific facts and phenomena are provided to the public; they are also, perhaps more importantly, agents able to shape public discourses and public opinions around those very facts and phenomena (Lecheler et al., 2019). As Heidenreich et al. point out, “the amount of attention the migration issue receives and how it is debated in the public sphere can affect perceptions and public opinion” (2020, p. 1262). The media play a central role in this development; as Lecheler et al. explain, “they set the agenda for public discourse, identify problems or challenges and may provide solutions” (2019, p. 692). In other words, by giving space to specific social phenomena like migration, the media contribute to their construction as social problems, whose prominence in the public sphere, including in the political debate, is linked to the visibility that they gain on media information.

It should be pointed out that adopting a constructivist perspective does not imply that the existence of migration as a realistic and critical phenomenon is denied here. As Viera explains, the intent is “to enable critical interrogation of the social and political forces that shape dominant understandings of it” (2016, p. 5.), and the media are indeed one of these forces. As Adoni & Mane had already clarified in 1984, the media have the power “to define the framework within which collective social reality is perceived, and consequently to shape the basis of social action” (in Viera, 2016, p. 5). This means that the peaks in migrants landings – which have indeed affected Europe and other areas worldwide – are insufficient to make migration a major social problem and, therefore, an urgent item on the political agenda. By way of explanation, in Italy – a major gateway to the EU for asylum-seekers – migration has been a decisive socio-political issue for electoral outcomes over the past two decades. However, in the 2022 election campaign, it received marginal attention in the media and political debate, despite a 75% increase in irregular entries compared to 2021 (Frontex, 2022).

Conversely, when migration facts are followed by massive attention from the media, the phenomenon gains societal relevance and is likely to become a prominent political issue (Heidenreich et al., 2020). As numerous studies show (Eberl et al., 2018; Jacobs & Hooghe, 2015; Koopmans, 1996; Lecheler et al., 2019; Van Klingeren et al., 2015), migration has received high levels of media attention in Europe over the past decades, particularly since the drowning of 360 Eritreans off the coast of Lampedusa in October 2013, and, more significantly, in the wake of the refugee crisis in 2015. Such increased attention had important socio-political fallout. As statistics have shown (Eurobarometer, 2019), fear of migrants has since continued to grow, remaining the main concern of European citizens until shortly before the COVID-19 outbreak. At the same time, as Heidenreich et al. point out, support for populist and right-wing parties has also increased, leading many of them to electoral success (2020, p. 1261).

The connection between media coverage of migration, a collective sentiment of fear, and the surge in support for populism can also be explained as a societal and political effect of the media framing of the phenomenon: the media not only establish what is to be talked of – agenda-setting – but also how it is to be talked of: it is not just the amount of information (visibility) that they give, but also the way in which such information is given – assigning a negative or a positive tonality to the events narrated – that affect how the public perceives and reacts to such events (Bleich et al., 2015). This is all the more relevant considering that, as “most people do have little to no direct contact with migration and immigrants in their daily lives ... media provide a vital link between actual migration processes and migrants and the citizens of the host society” (Lecheler et al., 2019, p. 693). In particular, as Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart (2009) have shown, negativity in media coverage increases people’s perception of migration as more problematic compared to other social and political issues.

2.2 Conceptual clarifications: agenda-setting and framing

Some clarifications are needed before outlining the main narrative frames through which the media refer to migration. In particular, two processes mentioned above deserve further elaboration for their critical role in the media creation of social problems: agenda-setting and framing.

The concept of agenda-setting was first introduced by McCombs & Shaw. According to their thesis, the media suggest what to think about, focusing more on certain issues that thereby gain more public attention. As the authors argued, focusing on in-print news, “readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position” (1972, p. 176). The reasoning behind this theory, which can be extended to other mass media (such as television and radio) as well as to online news outlets, refers to the visibility and importance assigned to specific social issues, thus making them more ‘salient’. As Shaw further explained:

people tend to include or exclude from their cognitions what the media include or exclude from their content ... and tend to assign importance to what they include that closely resembles the emphasis given to events, issues, and persons by the mass media (1979, p. 96).

The salience of migration on the media agenda is measured by the volume or intensity of reporting, i.e. the absolute number or relative share of news about the arrival and presence of migrant groups (Erbel et al., 2018); it can be increased by real major episodes, such as shipwrecks or terrorist attacks, rather than general trends (e.g. immigration numbers) – as already discussed in relation to the current Italian context – due to journalists' preference for single, large-scale events (Jacobs et al., 2018). Even more importantly, media salience has an impact on public opinions; as mentioned above, it influences not only the public's knowledge about the objects of coverage, in this case the migrants, but also their perceived importance, which can in turn shape collective attitudes and behaviour towards them. For instance, as Erbel et al. illustrate, “simply by emphasising the ethnicity of news subjects (i.e. by making it visible), news media can increase out-group hostility in the native media audiences” (2018, p. 210). In other cases, the effects of media salience on attitudes towards migration can be positive, such as when – they argue, referring to Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart (2009) – “the visibility of immigrant actors in the news (as opposed to the issue more generally) leads to less concern about migration (as opposed to other issues) in the public” (p. 211).

The agenda-setting effect can be explained through the innate need, present in every individual, to be guided in making sense of the world around them. In this regard, McCombs specifies that “whenever we find ourselves in a new situation, there is an uncomfortable psychological feeling until we explore and mentally grasp at least the outlines of that setting” (2002, p. 9). The framing process also contributes to satisfying this innate need for orientation, as it provides patterns and cues for interpreting the events appearing on the media agenda. In line with the constructivist approach, it can thus be argued that the media, particularly news media, do not simply reflect reality; they also shape it.

As the author further explains, such a need for orientation is a psychological trait and thus varies from one person to another, depending on the intensity of two components: relevance of and uncertainty about a specific topic. In sum, the more relevant a topic is to an individual and the less certain this individual feels about that topic, then the greater his or her need for orientation and, therefore, his or her vulnerability to the agenda-setting effects. We argue, however, that even when certainty is elevated (i.e., when the individual feels that he or she is sufficiently knowledgeable about a topic), exposure to agenda-setting can still be important if the relevance is particularly high, as in the case of members of professional categories that work and directly deal with that topic.

In this regard, an interesting reference is a research by Cook et al. (1983), which demonstrates how specialised audiences – i.e., policymakers – can be particularly sensitive to the salience that the media create around specific issues, thus altering that audience's perception of their relevance. With regard to migration, emergency personnel working in border areas seem to be highly sensitive to the

effects of the media, too; as it has been shown, they tend to reproduce in their interaction with migrants the stereotypical representations shaped by the media (Ieracitano & Vigneri, 2016).

These considerations, on which the present study is based, lead us to the other fundamental process: framing. As the cited research works suggest, audiences, in particular specialised audiences, tend not only to attribute to events the same relevance that these have in the media agenda, but also to internalise and reproduce the most recurrent patterns through which events are framed and thus represented by the media. In other words, we unconsciously tend to interpret and approach certain issues, and the actors that they involve, in the same way they are portrayed in the media.

The term ‘frames’ refers to specific repertoires of words, expressions, images, and metaphors that the media prefer over others when recounting an event; they set a certain tone (Eberl et al., 2018) for this event and obscure alternative key considerations around it (Harrison, 2016), guiding our cognitive and emotional understanding of the event itself, i.e., influencing our perceptions and emotions in relation to it. In other words, the media, by insistently resorting to specific categories of expressions to refer to a certain phenomenon, e.g. migration, tend to provide a specific representation and suggest a specific interpretation of it. As Igartua & Cheng explain, framing involves two operations: “selecting and emphasising words, expressions and images, to lend a point of view, focus or angle to a piece of information” (2009, p. 727), on which we unconsciously base the way we interpret it.

This process appears even more important when one considers that, as highlighted by all the studies mentioned so far, the voice of migrants is often silenced in the news stories about them. Despite being the real protagonists of the events narrated, migrants often appear as distant figures – and the media bombardment of arrival numbers contributes to this effect – while news reports tend to indulge in the description of events without giving due consideration to the complex dynamics behind them. As a result, the multifaceted phenomenon of migration is often flattened, in the media narrative as well as in our perception, to a question of landings and irregular border crossings, while migrants appear as naked lives (Agamben, 1998), whose bodies are both dangerous and in danger (Gatta, 2012).

2.3 Main media narratives and frames on migration

Media representations of migration tend to rely on two opposing narratives: a dominant alarmist one and a less recurrent but equally powerful pietist one. Both convey stereotypical images of migrants: on the one hand, that of the harmless refugee, in need and in distress, to be saved and protected (the pietist narrative of the migrant as a victim); on the other, that of the illegal intruder, i.e. the economic migrant eager to exploit the hosting country's welfare system and disrupt its cultural identity, to be rejected or surveilled (the alarmist narrative of the migrant as a threat). As we will see in detail below, these two narratives are not contradictory. They are based on different repertoires of terms, images and expressions (frames), and promote either humanitarian (liberal/progressive) or securitarian (anti-migrant/populist) positions on immigration. However, they both contribute to creating a single, albeit dichotomous, hegemonic representation, which silences alternative perspectives, including that of the migrants themselves, who are presented (and perceived) according to their main stereotypes.

As previously pointed out, we all have an innate need to be oriented in our effort to understand the complex reality surrounding us: words, in particular – but also images and numbers, both of which are powerful cognitive tools – come to our aid: they mobilise existing conceptual structures that we use to compare, categorise, describe and make sense of new events. However, while the events that occur in reality are potentially infinite and all diverse, the vocabulary that we use to refer to them is by necessity finite: we describe and understand (that is, we ‘frame’) new events by unconsciously resorting to old words and thus to old concepts (Carta di Roma, 2021). The media narrative of migration is a clear example of this process: for instance, where journalists adopt a war lexicon in

their reporting, they are resorting to (and providing us with) conceptual structures to describe and interpret migration as a security matter. The interpretative cues often figure in headlines and are coupled with evocative images that contribute to this cognitive association, as shown in Image 1 below:

Image 1²



Terms like “battle”, “secure”, “army”, “invasion”, along with the background image on the left – which foots from afar, as if from a surveillance camera, an indistinct group of faceless men behind barbed wire and under a gloomy sky – contribute to framing the related phenomenon, migration, and its protagonists, the migrants, in an alarmist way. The events in Calais were particularly illustrative in this sense: often referred to in the media as the Calais jungle (Ibrahim & Howarth, 2016), they tended to arise in our minds the concepts of chaos, unruliness and barbarism. As a result, migrants were often associated with the image of barbaric and irrational criminals (Silveira, 2016). Faced with such a danger, people usually feel threatened and call for urgent measures to keep this threat as far away as possible, ending up voting for far-right parties (Heidenreich et al., 2019). Similar effects occur when the media apply hyperboles related to natural disasters: speaking about migration to Europe as a “human tsunami” (Corriere della Sera, 1 April 2011)³ or a “tidal wave” (The Daily Mail, 26 June 2015)⁴ evokes the idea of a threat that is beyond not only our control but also our responsibility: “they are not directly caused by us ... they occur naturally” (Silveira, 2016, p. 6).

What happens when the media use humanitarian counter-narratives? These are less recurrent compared to the dominant alarmist ones and are more used in the progressive and liberal press (Allen, 2016; Belluati, 2014; Eberl et al., 2018). However, the language on which they rely is powerful in mobilising the conceptual domains of misery and despair: migration is often depicted as a tragic experience and migrants as defenceless victims (Ieracitano & Vigneri, 2016). In this case, the image

² Source: Sully, A. (2015, 30 July). Newspaper headlines: 'Send the Army to Calais'. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-the-papers-33713392> [05.09.2022]

³ Berlusconi: 100 rimpatri al giorno. Appello a Tunisi: «è uno tsunami umano». (2011, 1 April). *Corriere della Sera*. https://www.corriere.it/politica/11_aprile_01/immigrazione-piano-cabina-regia_ef3d7c94-5c38-11e0-b06c-b43ad3228bba.shtml

⁴ Burleigh, M. (2015, 26 June). Forget the Greek crisis or Britain's referendum, this tidal wave of migrants could be the biggest threat to Europe since the war, writes Michael Burleigh. *The Daily Mail*. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3141005/Tidal-wave-migrants-biggest-threat-Europe-war.html>

of the human tsunami is replaced by that of the “liquid graveyard” (The Guardian, 22 November 2021)⁵, and migrants – previously addressed as a threat – are here defined as “castaways”, “poor” and “hopeless” (Ieracitano & Rumi, 2014), whom we have a responsibility to save. The tone of the images also changes, as shown in Image 2 below:

Image 2⁶



The lexicon here is that of humanitarian disasters: “horror”, “tragedy”, “die” and “drown” are all evocative of human catastrophes, whose responsibility rests on our conscience (“shameful”). Although they are again sombre settings, the tone of the pictures, too, differs from the examples in Image 1: in two cases (The Daily Telegraph and The Guardian), single figures can be distinguished, emphasising a sense of individuality and making it easier for the viewer to identify with the subjects framed (Ropeik, 2011). Moreover, not surprisingly, the cameras focus on children, whose fragility, strongly emphasised here, makes them symbolic of the condition of the desperate “refugee”. The pictures of Aylan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian boy lying lifeless on a Turkish shore, were a case in point in this regard. They made headlines all over Europe in 2015 and circulated extensively on social media, leading to increased demands on Western countries to give priority to the plight of Syrian refugees and accept them in their territories, thus prompting humanitarian reactions.

Therefore, pietist narratives, based on the rhetoric of the humanitarian crisis, tend to promote more inclusive attitudes and behaviours (Boomgaarden & Vliegthart, 2009; Erbel et al., 2018). However, the general perception of migration still appears to be linked to an idea of emergency, which thus has both an alarmist-securitarian and a pietist-humanitarian face. As pointed out by some scholars (e.g., Chouliaraki et al., 2017; Harrison, 2016), such a dual representation gives shape to an abstract and stereotypical image of the migrant: whether it refers to the alarmist stereotype of the economic migrant or the sentimental one of the poor refugee, this image says nothing of the dynamics

⁵ Tondo, L. (2021, 22 November). Aid workers say Mediterranean a ‘liquid graveyard’ after 75 feared dead off Libya. *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/22/aid-workers-say-mediterranean-a-liquid-graveyard-after-75-feared-dead-off-libya>

⁶ Source: Martin, F. (2021, 25 November). ‘Shameful’: what the UK papers said about Channel tragedy. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/nov/25/shameful-sombre-reporting-and-finger-pointing-after-channel-tragedy>

unfolding in individual experiences: a passive victim to be saved or a threatening intruder to be surveilled.

Furthermore, as some cases in Image 2 show, the vocabulary of figures recurs in the pietist frame, too. Referring to their lives in terms of numbers diverts from the potential empathy that certain close-ups on migrants' faces may encourage: migrants end up being, once again, objectified. Thus, confirming the previous considerations, two opposite narrative frames overlap: a qualitatively pietist one (the desperation of the shipwrecked migrants) and a quantitatively alarmist one (the numbers of the dead migrants). Such a combination ends up reinforcing collective imagery of the migrants that is overall stigmatising (powerless victims) and dehumanising (indistinct masses): hordes of migrants in need of assistance. In this vein, we can argue that 'humanitarian' does not necessarily correspond to 'humanising'.

Importantly, we tend to make all these cognitive associations unconsciously and we are rarely aware that the media frames guide us through such processes: the conceptual structure evoked by a term or an image is not part of what the media explicitly say. Thus, accepting their terms and images, we end up internalising, and perhaps reusing, the related concepts without realising it (Carta di Roma, 2021). In this regard, numbers and images are powerful tools. Appearing respectively as objective data and snapshots of reality, neither the numbers nor the images leave room for interpretation. Yet, insisting on certain aspects of a given reality (e.g. numbers of landings or photos of shipwrecks) contributes to a specific, often stereotyped representation of that reality, able to structure, reinforce and orient the public discourse and behaviour around it (Vigneri & Ieracitano, 2021).

In conclusion, media frames often do not result in explicitly stereotypical discourses, as the concepts that they evoke are often concealed, and the processes through which such concepts are evoked are unconscious. In this sense, pietist frames are particularly effective. While overtly alarmist frames can be easily recognised – especially by sensitised audiences, who can activate critical filters against their negative effects – pietist and ethic-humanitarian narratives can prove more insidious and powerful in objectifying migrants. Therefore, pietist written, numerical and visual contents can even facilitate the internalisation of a dehumanising image of the migrant, and reinforce a stereotypical representation of migration capable to influence even sensitised publics, as empirical data show below.

3. Civil society's perception of migration

3.1 The context of the research

The Inclusive Europe project promoted integration and intercultural dialogue in six EU Member States – Belgium, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands – through the rolling-up of four thematic campaigns implemented by a European network of seven local civil society organisations. These organisations were directly involved in the development and structuring of the four campaigns, which were designed to create contexts for intercultural exchange and mutual understanding between local citizens and young migrants, through a wide range of mentoring and training workshops, game and sports activities, cultural events (e.g. film and reading sessions) with open debates, and visits to places of worships. The activities took place over two years, from October 2020 to September 2022.

Much of the effort undertaken by the partner organisations was thus dedicated to sensitising each of the two target groups – native citizens and newcomers aged 18-28 – to a fairer perception and deeper understanding of the other. In this regard, the partners identified the reorientation of the collective representation of migration as a key factor. Indeed, in addition to the numerous activities focused on the material aspects of integration (language literacy, expanding relational networks, developing skills through volunteering activities, etc.), some of the initiatives and events organised

were open to the public and aimed to mitigate prejudices and stereotypes on migrants, including through the possibility for migrants to express their cultural roots and share their personal stories and experiences.

Thus, both in contributing to the design of the campaigns and, more specifically, in substantiating the initiatives focused on improving participants' awareness and mutual knowledge, the members of such organisations have somehow conveyed their own sensitivities and representations with regard to the migration phenomenon, which have fed into the activities themselves. It can therefore be assumed that, insofar as they are reflected in initiatives involving both migrants and locals, such representations may have an actual social impact. It thus appears interesting to reflect on how these representations are shaped and if and to what extent the dominant media rhetoric on migration, of which a theoretical framework has been offered in the previous sections, interferes with their shaping.

An anonymous online survey was shared internally with partner organisations to collect quantitative and qualitative data on their staff's understanding of the migration phenomenon. In particular, the intention was to understand their conceptual and emotional approach to the phenomenon and its protagonists, the migrants. All the organisations that participated in the project deal with migration, albeit to varying degrees. Some have dedicated units within their organisational structures, while others mention it as one of their main areas of expertise; migration plays an important role even for those that do not explicitly refer to it in their missions, as their fields of action focus on intercultural dialogue and peaceful coexistence between religions and cultures in European societies.

The staff involved in project implementation, to whom the survey was addressed, are all under the age of 40, with women outnumbering men. They are based in different areas of the EU (Southern, Eastern and Western Europe), thus ensuring a fair representation of its geo-cultural diversity.

3.2 Methodological clarifications

The survey was anonymous and was shared online with the seven partner organisations, specifically with the staff members actively involved in the project – an average of two members per organisation: overall, 15 people responded. The relatively low number of respondents – although proportionate to the size of the network and fairly representative of its composition – did not allow this study to come to scientific conclusions. However, it did not prevent it either from initiating a critical reflection on the impact of media narratives of migration, even on sensitised publics.

The survey combined quantitative and qualitative components. In total, it consisted of ten questions, three multiple-choice (with a maximum of three answers), three closed-ended (only one answer) and four open-ended (with a limit of 400 characters). Including open-ended questions allowed compensating for the inevitably limited lists of options of the two other typologies of questions: through them, respondents could share their frustration or alternative opinions, which were in fact very interesting data. To the same end, a free option named 'other' was also added, where possible, to the closed-ended and multiple-choice questions. In ten cases – corresponding to a meaningful 16.7% of the total⁷ – open-ended questions allowed participants to express discomfort with the partial ranges of the options offered, which they explicitly considered biased by the media rhetoric or linked to the collective emotions and the public and political discourse on immigration. As concerns the closed-ended and multiple-choice questions, the free option 'other' was used in 8.5% of the cases in which this was available.

The three multiple-choice questions addressed migration in general terms and offered longer lists of options, i.e. nine plus the free option 'other'. This option was not present in one of these questions, namely the one proposing a closed list of ten images. Such broad questions were each

⁷ This percentage reflects both the proportion on the total of all 60 open-ended responses and the average of the proportions on the partial totals of 15 responses for each of the four open-ended questions.

followed by an open-ended question aimed at giving respondents the chance to elaborate on and contextualise their choices. On the other hand, the three closed-ended questions were theme-specific, and had shorter lists of options, i.e. five plus the free option ‘other’. This option was not present in one of these questions, either, i.e. the one that proposed a closed list of five news headlines. However, due to the relevance of its focus, this question was followed by an open-ended question allowing for further elaboration.

The open-ended responses helped to clarify respondents’ conceptual associations and offered insights into their cognitive and emotional reactions to the topics proposed in the survey. For this reason, a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the content of such responses was also carried out, which consisted of selecting the terms and expressions that the respondents used, which conveyed specific tones to their arguments, and associating them with corresponding thematic units⁸. The results of this content analysis fed into the overall analysis of this study and contributed to its ultimate goal: to investigate possible correspondences or discrepancies between the participants’ interpretative frames and those used by the media.

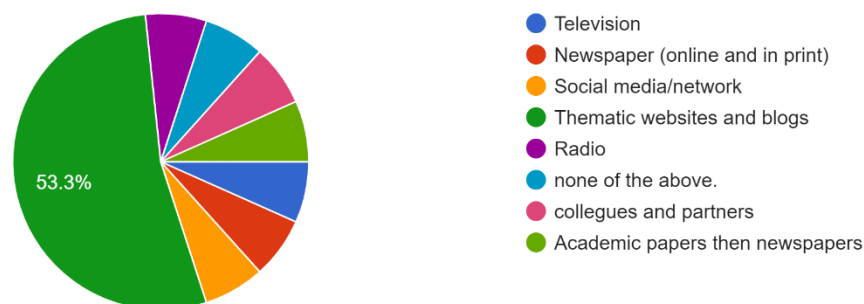
The topics and the contents of the survey were selected based on the main media frames on migration identified through the literature review, namely the security and alarmist frame and the humanitarian and pietist one. On a few occasions, other frames were also considered to widen the range of possible reactions and give visibility to alternative counter-narratives: the frame of migration as an opportunity and the frame of migration as a challenge, both focused on the post-arrival phase.

3.3 Main findings

To present the main results of the survey, the graphs below show the options most frequently selected by the respondents for each question. As the multiple-choice questions (Graphs 2, 3 and 4) allowed for a maximum of three options, the relative percentages cannot produce a 100% sum; however, they are shown since they provide evidence of the priorities expressed by the participants. The two last graphs (Graphs 7 and 8) show a summary of the results of the content analysis of the open-ended responses.

Graph 1

Which of the following channels/sources of information do you trust the most to be informed about migration?
15 responses



As the first graph shows, the majority of respondents (53.3%) stated that they rely on online sources specific to the topic of migration – i.e., thematic websites and blogs – while all other options

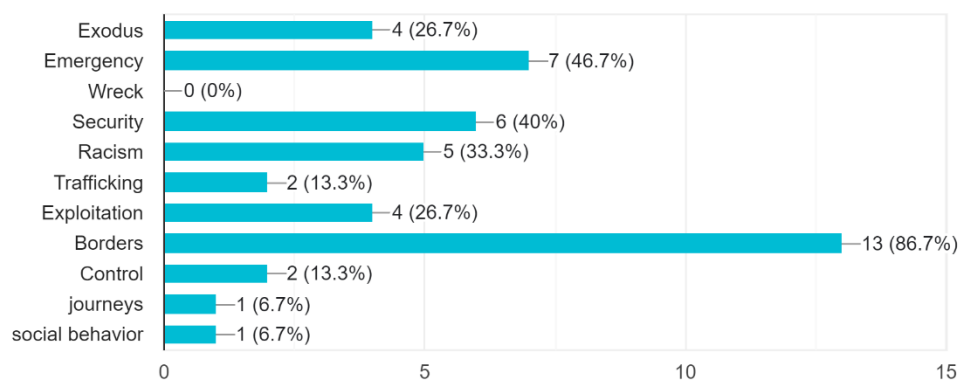
⁸ The ten open-ended responses denoting a certain awareness of the respondents about the interference of the media and political rhetoric on the perception of migration were assessed separately and were not included in this content analysis.

were selected by only one respondent, with 6.7% each (closed-ended question). This indicates a prevailing tendency among the civil society representatives surveyed to choose specialised sources of information, which they prefer over generalist sources such as television, radio and newspapers, or digital media such as social networks. The search for more reliable sources is in line with the image of an interested and sensitised public such as that of civil society and may provide an explanation for the awareness of the dynamics of media interference that – as previously pointed out – was found in a significant (albeit minority) percentage of cases. However, this does not prevent them from being exposed to the influence of certain media narratives, as the following graphs show.

Graph 2

Which of the following term(s) would you associate with migration?

15 responses



Most of the answers provided by the respondents in relation to the nouns that they would most associate with migration (multiple-choice question) evoke the concepts of security and emergency. As Graph 2 shows, the most selected options were “Borders” (86.7%), “Emergency” (46.7%) and “Security” (40%). However, based on the open-ended responses received in relation to this question, these three terms were mainly chosen to express a pietist-humanitarian perception of the issue. While the choice of a term like 'emergency' can easily be analysed as being in association with the idea of an ongoing humanitarian crisis (and the respondents' explanations confirmed this association), some ambiguity may have arisen in relation to terms like 'border' and 'security'. However, as was clear from the participants' open-ended arguments, these terms mostly referred to the insecurity and desperation of migrants and the many risks that they face during their dangerous journeys. Finally, in two cases, the three terms were consciously associated with the general perception and political discourse on migration, as explicitly revealed by the open-ended responses.

Graph 3

Which of the following image(s) would you associate with migration?

15 responses

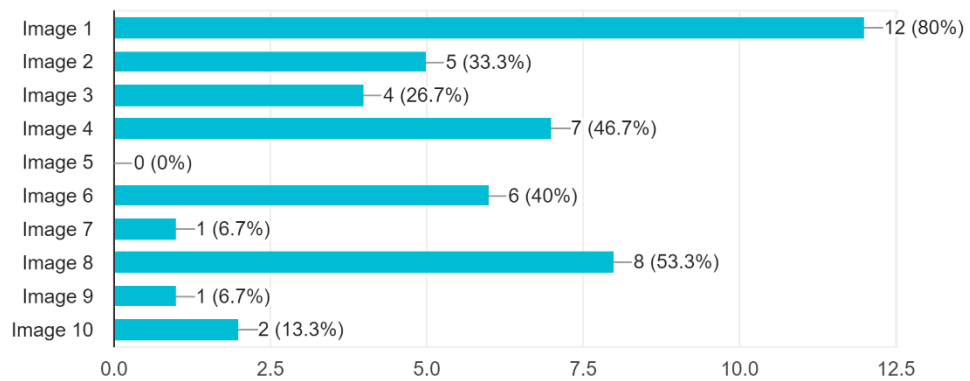


Image 1



Image 8



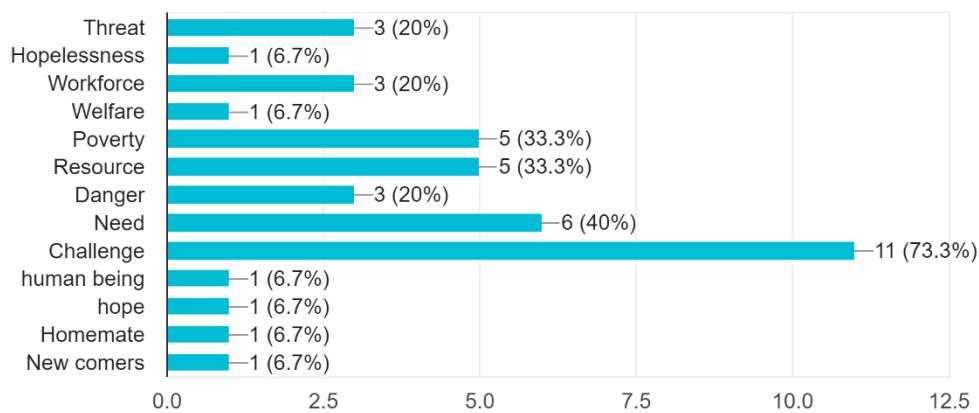
Image 4

As in the previous case, most of the responses received in relation to the images that the participants would most associate with migration (multiple choice questions) evoked the ideas of emergency and security. Image 1 (a close-up of a shipwrecked migrant's face) was the most selected (80%), followed by Image 8 (a close-up of a law enforcement officer checking the identity of an alleged migrant) (53.3%) and Image 4 (a close-up of a man carrying a child through rubble) (46.7%). While the motivations behind Images 1 and 4 need no further explanation, the open-ended responses helped to clarify the conceptual association triggered by image 8, the choice of which is mainly related to the idea of the often cumbersome and time-consuming bureaucratic procedures that migrants have to face once they arrive in Europe, thus conveying the alternative narrative of migration as a challenge and shifting the focus to the post-arrival phase.

Graph 4

Which of the following term(s) would you associate to a migrant?

15 responses

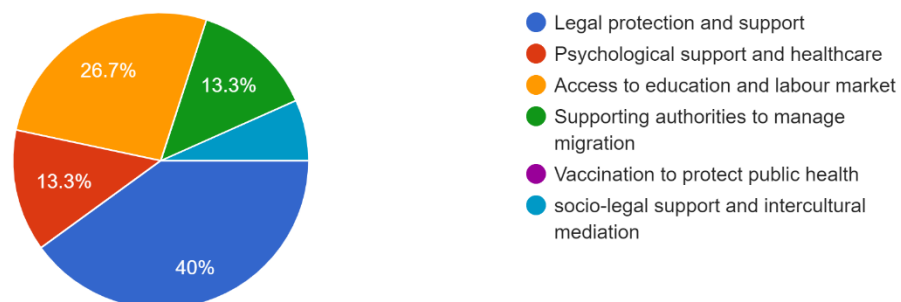


In line with the previous results, the frame of migration as a challenging phenomenon also emerges in response to the third multiple-choice question, which asked participants to choose the noun that they would most associate with migrants. The most selected one was “Challenge” (73.3%), followed by “Need” (40%), and “Poverty” and “Resource” (both 33.3%). The open-ended responses confirmed the association of the term “Challenge” with the alternative narrative referring to the complexity of living in a new context. Moreover, while terms like ‘need’ and ‘poverty’ were clearly linked to the pietist frame of the migrant as a person in need, the term “Resource” was mainly associated with the counter-narrative of the migrant as an opportunity, again focusing on the post-arrival phase, when he or she can bring a social and economic contribution to the host society.

Graph 5

In your opinion, which of the following areas of intervention should be a priority for an organisation dealing with migration?

15 responses



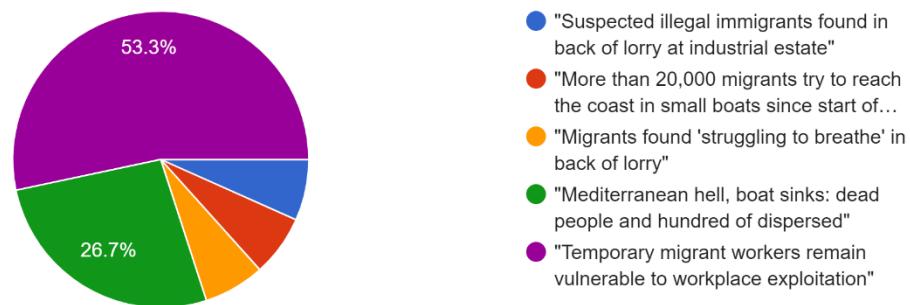
The graph above shows the main answers given in relation to a closed-ended question, which asked respondents to select the main area of intervention for an organisation dealing with migration. Most of them selected “Legal protection and support”, which, together with the similar answer “Socio-legal support and intercultural mediation” (entered once as the ‘other’ option), accounted for almost 50% of responses (46.7%). The second most selected option was “Access to education and labour market” (26.7%), while “Psychological support and healthcare” and “Supporting authorities to manage migration” each accounted for 13.3% of the total. No open-ended questions were proposed

here. However, these responses can easily be read as being associated, once again, mainly with pietist frames, in which the migrant appears as a person in need of protection (mainly legal, but also psycho-physical), as well as – especially for the second most selected option – with frames focusing on the post-arrival phase, when the migrant faces integration challenges, especially in the field of education and employment. Rather, “Supporting authorities to manage migration” seems to be linked to a more securitarian frame, in which migration emerges as a social issue to be addressed.

Graph 6

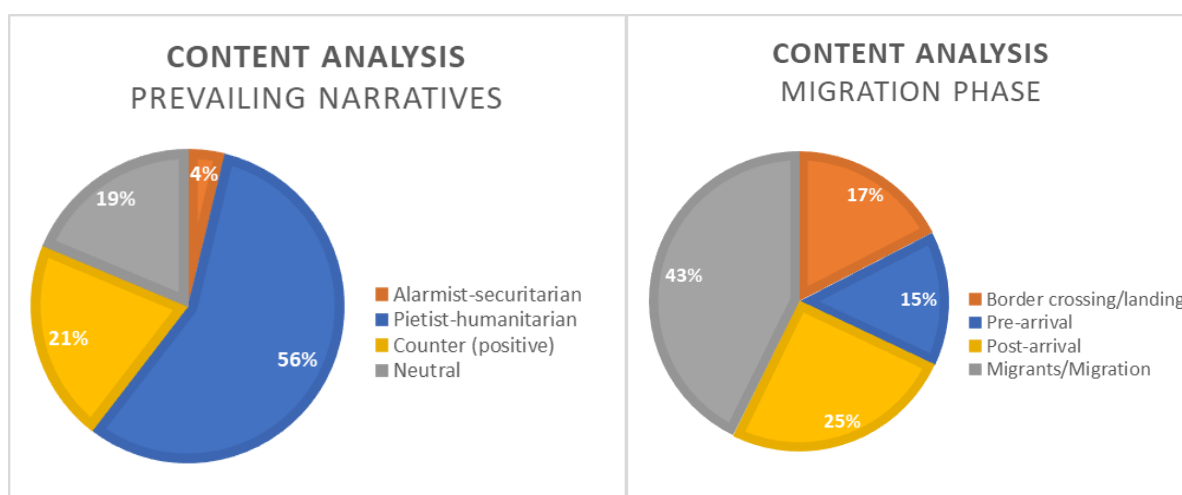
Reading their headlines below, which of the following articles would you be most likely to read?

15 responses

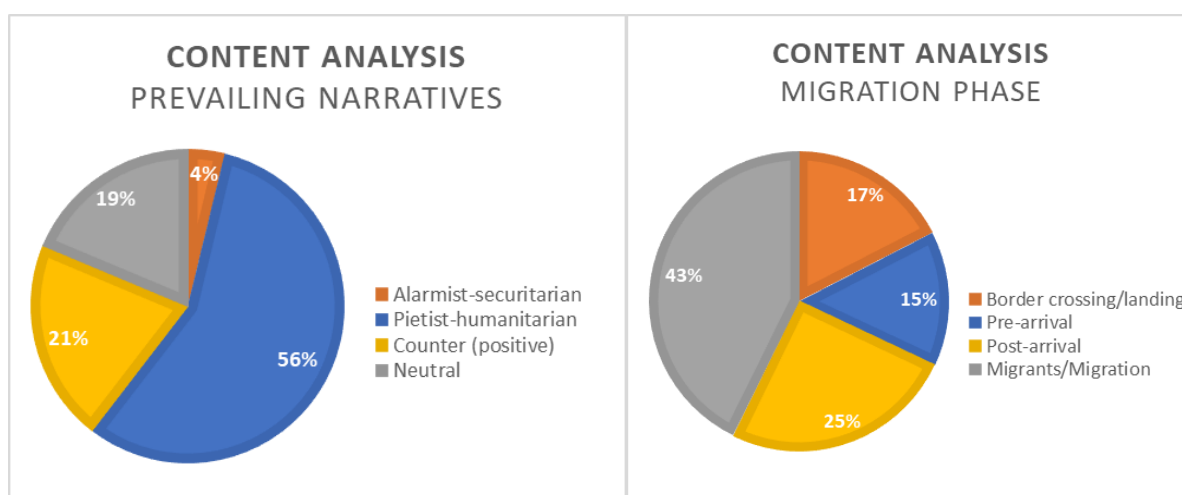


Graph 6 shows the main answers given by participants in response to a closed list of five news headlines (closed-ended question). Based on these titles, the article that respondents would be most likely to read was “Temporary migrant workers remain vulnerable to workplace exploitation”, with more than half of the responses (53.3%). This was followed by “Mediterranean hell, boat sinks: dead people and hundred of dispersed” (26.7%), while the other three headlines were chosen only once (6.7% each). The free option 'other' could not be proposed here; however, respondents were given the possibility to elaborate on their reactions by answering an open-ended question. Their open responses indicated a certain focus once again on the post-arrival phase: indeed, the most selected headline was chosen mainly because of the importance that respondents attach to the challenges faced by migrants once they arrive in Europe, which need to be better addressed. However, as emerges from other open-ended responses, this focus was in some cases linked to a certain concern among respondents for the hardships that affect migrants in general, including after their arrival. This emphasises the idea of an enduring vulnerability, difficult to eradicate and which characterises migrants’ conditions throughout their migratory experience: although less explicit, therefore, the pietist frame is equally present here. A pietist tone emerges clearly from the second most selected article, where a humanitarian narrative prevails: most of the open-ended responses related to this headline contain evocative expressions and terms such as 'dramatic', 'death' and 'tragedy', indicating a high sensitivity among respondents to this powerful media frame. This emotional tonality emerges strongly in the following open response: “*the bad conditions of refugees trip to seek asylum, their hazardous and desperate trip, hopeless situations and limited opportunities touch me most*”. As many as five of the words used in this sentence refer to an emotional, if not pessimistic, frame: “bad”, “hazardous”, “desperate”, “hopeless”, “limited” and “touch”. In this regard, it should be emphasised that a pitying tone emerged overall from all the open-ended questions in the survey, as shown by the content analysis of their responses presented below. On a final note, again with regard to this specific question, it is also worth noting that respondents' consciousness of the impact of public and media discourse on migration emerged more than in all other cases: 4 of the 15 open-ended responses to this question expressed such awareness.

Graph 7



Graph 8



As already explained, a content analysis was conducted on the 60 open responses, the results of which are summarized in the two graphs above. To carry out this analysis, 350 terms (nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) and expressions (short sentences) indicative of the ways in which respondents referred to the issues addressed were selected and then associated with specific interpretative frames and the migration phase to which they referred. As both graphs show, the content analysis confirmed the trends emerged from the analysis of the answers to the non-open-ended questions. In particular, Graph 7 shows a clear prevalence of the pietist-humanitarian frame (56%), especially when compared to the alarmist-securitarian one, limited to only 4% of cases. The pietist frame emerges in particular from those words and expressions of the respondents that emphasised critical traits of migration, such as emergency, exploitation and the hopelessness of its protagonists, the migrants. Even when terms and expressions closer to other interpretative frames were used, such as those framing migration as a security issue or as a benefit for national labour markets, overall a pitying tone often prevailed, which led to framing the issue as a concern for the vulnerable conditions of migrants, at risk of death during the border crossing and at risk of exploitation once they arrive. However, in line with the main results of the survey, the content analysis also identified some frames based on counter-narratives. A positive narrative emerged in 21% of the analysed content, in which migration was framed as a more faceted phenomenon than that portrayed by the media, and the migrant as a human being endowed with skills, experience and cultural diversity rather than a passive victim. Moreover, in a significant 19% of cases, the language used by the respondents was rather neutral, especially when referring to migration and migrants as such, i.e. precisely through the terms “migration” and “migrant” without other linguistic elements that could have conveyed a negative or positive tone. Finally, Graph 8 shows the stages of the migration experience to which the analysed terms and expressions referred; while the relative majority of cases (43%) referred to the migration phenomenon in general, a quarter (25%) focused on the post-arrival phase, confirming a certain sensitivity among the respondents towards the (both positive and negative) challenges of integration, thus diverging from the prevailing attention of the media, often focused on the numbers and drama of sea landings and border crossings.

4. Conclusions

By comparing the results of the data analysis with what was previously identified through the literature review in the field of media and migration studies, it is possible to outline some trends with respect to the impact of media narratives on civil society's perception of migration in Europe.

Existing research has indicated two prevailing interpretative frames in the media discourse on migration: a dominant alarmist-securitarian one and a less recurrent pietist-humanitarian one. These two opposing narratives contribute to the production of a doubly stereotyped image of migration and the migrant. In this dichotomous representation, the latter appears as a de-subjectivised and de-historicised figure, a victim who is at the same time a potential threat, while all the complexity of the migration phenomenon is sacrificed to oversimplification.

More specifically, the experience of migrating is often flattened to the topical moment of the sea landing and the border crossing, in which the traits of drama and chaos are condensed; likewise, the experience of the migrant is reduced to the visualisation of their despair and, more often, the illegality of their behaviour. In the first case, a passive image is evoked, that of a victim, of a poor refugee in need of protection. When their agency is restored, this vision is transformed into an active, albeit alarmist one, that of the economic migrant, who illegally crosses our borders and threatens our economic and socio-cultural order. This dual representation leaves little room for alternative interpretations, both in media discourse and in the public's imagination.

The few studies conducted on specialised audiences (e.g. border operators) have revealed their propensity to grasp the salience given to the issue by the media and to reproduce the same media frames in their interaction with the migrants. The present study follows in this wake, focusing in particular on the media's potential interference with another specialised audience: civil society. This is mainly composed of professionals who are sensitised and often engaged in migration-related issues, especially at the local level. In particular, their activities tend to focus on integration: this might explain why the surveyed civil society workers gave visibility also to alternative frames, which refer to the post-arrival phase and its challenges. However, a pietist tone overall prevailed in their answers, reflecting that conveyed by the media in highlighting the suffering of migrants during the crossing.

On the contrary, the alarmist-securitarian frame, which the scientific literature on the subject has almost unanimously indicated as dominant in the media representation of migration, seems to be marginal, if not completely absent, in the way in which civil society interprets the phenomenon, where pietistic frames predominate. In fact, as emerged from the data analysis, migration was mainly presented as a dramatic, often tragic experience by the respondents, many of whom referred to the migrant as a passive victim of a destiny of suffering and exploitation, the result of irresponsible management by European governments.

This is not surprising, considering this audience's sensitivity to social distress, including that of migrants. Although likely to inspire more inclusive attitudes and behaviour, the pietist-humanitarian narrative can be particularly insidious when compared to the more explicit and therefore recognisable alarmist-securitarian one: usually hidden behind more sympathetic language, the pietist frame can be particularly powerful in fostering the internalisation of certain stereotypes (e.g. the migrant as a passive and hopeless victim): as the data analysis confirmed, civil society tends to be particularly exposed to this risk, which would deserve further investigation.

Another interesting element emerged, briefly mentioned above. Although the alarmist-securitarian frame prevails in the media representation of migration, this is often based, as previously explained, on a combination of alarm and compassion, which gives little, if any, space to alternative narratives. These, on the other hand, emerged from the responses given by participants, who thus broke the dichotomy in which the media encloses the figure of the migrant, stereotyping it: from the survey, migration also appeared as an opportunity for the host society, as well as a challenge in terms of social inclusion in it. In both cases, the phenomenon regains depth and multidimensionality, as it extends beyond the dramatic/illegal phase of the crossing to also include the complexity of integration. Migrants also regain historicity and (positive) agency: they are bearers of suffering and needs, but also of resources and skills, which they can leverage, in the medium and long term, for their own good and that of the host community.

However, within these more optimistic and less passive frames, the pietist narrative also creeps in, namely that of migration as an opportunity and of the migrant as a resource. As data analysis

indicates, even within this frame the migrant appears as in need of protection, an exploited resource, while migration is seen as opportunistically mismanaged by EU governments for their own interests. Both retain a dark undertone of drama and vulnerability, perceived as perhaps too difficult to eradicate.

Last but not least, the data revealed a certain awareness of the dynamics of media framing on the part of the civil society representatives involved in the survey. In 16.7% of the cases – not a low percentage given the technicality of the issue – the respondents reacted to the proposed textual and visual content by explicitly attributing it to the pervasiveness of media and political discourse. This is also not surprising. As mentioned, civil society is a sensitised public, who tends to turn to specialised sources to be informed about migration, as indicated in the survey. Therefore, their sensitivity is not just a matter of human sympathy: although this sympathy makes them particularly susceptible to absorbing pietistic rhetoric, they rely on a solid thematic knowledge that sometimes supports them in a more critical reading of the issue.

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