

The hierarchisation of Afghan and Ukrainian refugees in discourse in the Spanish press

La jerarquización de los refugiados afganos y ucranianos en el discurso de la prensa española



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Abstract:

Starting from the premise that some refugees are more welcome than others, this study analyses the reflective and intellectual discourse on the categorisation of refugees projected by the Spanish press in the last two crises that have directly involved Europe: Afghanistan (2021) and Ukraine (2022). Special attention is paid to Semetko & Valkenburg's framing perspective, and texts from *ABC*, *El Mundo*, *El País* and *La Vanguardia* are reviewed through quantitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis. The results show differences in the coverage of the two crises: while the Afghan crisis is Europeanised in its interpretation and deals with quotas for reception, the memory of the 2015 crisis or the blocks of countries (the supportive and the distrustful), the Ukrainian crisis is humanised (through perspectives and narratives), domesticated (directly affects the host societies), and allows recognition of the thesis of double standards or refugee hierarchies.

Keywords:

Refugees; critical discourse analysis; Afghanistan; Ukraine; framing.

Resumen:

Partiendo de que unos refugiados son mejor bienvenidos que otros, esta investigación analiza el discurso reflexivo e intelectual sobre la categorización de refugiados proyectado por la prensa española en las dos últimas crisis que implicaron directamente a Europa: Afganistán (2021) y Ucrania (2022). Con especial atención a la perspectiva del framing de Semetko y Valkenburg, se revisan textos de ABC, El Mundo, El País y La Vanguardia por medio de un análisis de contenido de corte cuantitativo y un análisis crítico del discurso. Los resultados manifiestan diferencias en la cobertura de ambas crisis: si la afgana se europeiza en su interpretación y trata de cuotas de acogida, el recuerdo a la crisis de 2015 o los bloques de países (los solidarios y los desconfiados), la ucraniana se humaniza (por enfoques e historias), domestica (toca directamente a las sociedades de acogida) y permite reconocer la tesis de los dobles estándares o las jerarquías de refugiados.

Palabras clave:

Refugiados; análisis crítico del discurso; Afganistán; Ucrania; framing.

1. Introduction

Large-scale forced displacement of people has acquired remarkable prominence in the media, especially since the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean in 2015 (which arose from the conflict in Syria that had begun four years previously), but also following events in Afghanistan in 2021 and Ukraine in 2022 (Zarauza-Valero, 2021). 2015 saw images such as that of little Aylan Kurdi stranded lifeless on a beach or of crowds walking along train tracks to reach the longed-for European Eden, which moved the issue of refugees to the top of political, academic and media agendas, as well as in debate and public opinion (d'Haenens & Joris, 2019).

An event that was to bring a group of refugees back to the forefront of news coverage in August 2021 was the evacuation from Afghanistan following the final withdrawal of US troops and the capture of Kabul by Taliban forces (Rashid, 2022). The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates the number of Afghans displaced to other countries at 2.6 million, the majority in Iran and

Pakistan, to which another 3.5 million internally displaced persons must be added (UNHCR, 2023a). Its impact in Spain has not been excessive, as only 1,581 asylum applications have been documented (Spanish Commission for Refugee Aid, 2023).

Another event that triggered a new diaspora took place at the end of February 2022, when Russian troops invaded Ukraine, leading to a mass exodus of civilians. According to the UNHCR (2023b), more than 6 million people have been forced to leave the country, while it is estimated that there are another 8 million internally displaced persons. The effect of this crisis in Spain has been greater than the Afghan case, given that as of October 1, 2023, there were 211,408 registered Ukrainians, doubling the figures from the previous year (National Institute of Statistics, 2023).

This paper critically analyses the discourse of the press to determine whether Spanish journalism favours intellectual and ethical reflection on the existence of refugees who are accepted more or less readily by host societies. In other words, in light of the events in Afghanistan and Ukraine, the paper seeks to clarify whether Spanish written journalism questions double standards or categories of people (first or second class) fleeing armed conflicts.

In addition to looking more closely into the Afghan case, which, with few exceptions (Bucken-Knapp & Zelano, 2023), has been forgotten in academic output, what is innovative in this paper is the empirical, qualitative examination from the Spanish perspective. Such hierarchisation had previously been treated in a sociological reflection that highlights the paradoxes and contradictions of Western responses to both crises (De Coninck, 2023), presented in a technical report - with little scientific validity since it does not provide a methodological design - that was delivered to the European Commission and that presented different examples of international media narratives (none concerning Spain) that proved those double standards (Ibañez Sales, 2023).

According to Eberl et al. (2018), journalistic attitudes to refugees (and migration in general) varies depending on the country from which the report is made, the ideology of the medium, the type of migration, the cultural proximity (or distance) of the migrant or refugee, the newsworthiness of any events emerging, political changes, the proposed topics or approaches, etc. Despite this, their review shows that migrants and refugees are often considered economic, cultural or criminal threats to the host societies (the security approach), which is why they are represented in a highly unfavourable or negative way. This approach is consistent with social journalism studies, which advocate for journalists looking more deeply into the contexts of vulnerable groups (in our case, migrants), avoiding negative stereotypes (propensity to conflict, threat, illegality), such stereotypes generally being linked to striking events that generate concern in public opinion (Cytrynblum, 2004). Superficiality in the analysis, the absence of diverse information sources and of testimonies from the migrants themselves, or the use of inappropriate terminology to refer to them, would go against this type of journalism, contributing to worsening the necessary mutual understanding and coexistence, thus failing to comply with the social commitment that should govern journalists' work (Castillo-Tamayo & Domínguez-Delgado, 2020). This type of coverage conditions the perceptions of political actors and influences voting behaviour (Martínez Lirola, 2022; Zapata-Barrero & Van Dijk, 2007). On the other hand, there is another type of more positive and supportive narrative (the humanitarian approach), which can even become paternalistic or victim-seeking (Ibañez Sales, 2023; Gómez-Quintero et al., 2021). In these cases, the media's dealings with migrants are more personalist, highlighting the dangers they have faced, their insecurity, problems with mafias, human trafficking, hurdles to integration, etc. (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017; Caviedes, 2015).

As regards refugees and journalistic discourse in Spain, Arcos Urrutia et al. (2021) argue that it is a phenomenon that is presented superficially by the media, with hardly any reflection or opinion. It is true that, depending on the newspaper, room is found for the refugees' demands, for their life stories and for a humanistic approach to the phenomenon itself, but the most frequent approach is from an institutional viewpoint, since the priority is the politics, or the social actions and solidarity promoted by associations and NGOs. The scant space given to these people as a source of information in the texts is the main conclusion of another work focused on the case of the ship Aquarius, which does recognise a certain degree of visibility for migrants and refugees, but always from brief statements, without providing details (Arévalo Salinas et al., 2021).

Study of the Aquarius case allows Martínez Lirola (2022) to suggest the existence of a humanitarian narrative that reinforces solidarity through the dualism "us" and "them": some are active when they welcome, help and provide care, while others are passive when they are welcomed, helped and cared for. Her proposal favours a journalistic discourse that is more committed to social justice, which promotes the inclusion and empowerment of refugees, which naturalises aid between countries and people for humanitarian reasons, and which brings respect for diversity and the defence of the rights of all human beings into public focus. Bañón Hernández (2021) also investigates the particularities of journalistic discourse in his terminological examination (*migrant, immigrant, refugee, asylum seeker*) of the differences in the phases of the migratory journey, encouraging a rethinking of the collective imagination projected in the news, and an improvement of media routines.

Any deliberation of narratives and approaches requires reference to framing theory, a paradigm that considers that journalists and opinion leaders, consciously or unconsciously, impose judgments when composing their texts (Entman, 1993). Journalistic pieces incorporate frames that are manifested by the presence or absence of certain key words, set phrases, arguments, stereotypical images, sources of information, etc. Facts do not exist in isolation but are given meaning by being embedded in a narrative, and it is frames that help show what is happening with a certain problem or social issue (Cools et al., 2024). Therefore, as certain aspects of reality are emphasised and made more prominent in narratives, media coverage of an event may be framed from different angles, affecting the receiver's interpretation of news events (Scheufele, 1999).

Along with framing, this paper uses the postulations of critical discourse analysis from the perspective of social representation (Moscovici, 1961) and the study of power relations, domination and inequality (Zapata-Barrero & Van Dijk, 2007), to demystify ideologies through the systematic and reproductive exploration of semiotic data. Among all the approaches involved in critical discourse studies, the discursive-historical approach (Wodak, 2001; Reisigl & Wodak, 2000) facilitates the methodical, explicit and transparent study (therefore reproducible) of the intertextual dimension by studying the ways in which discourses evolve over time (Ferreiro Gómez & Wodak, 2014). One of its crucial attributes is that it allows for the association of critical theory with empirical research (Wodak et al., 2009).

The media are decisive in the construction of social reality and in the moulding of public opinion (d'Haenens & Mattelart, 2011), they influence decision- and policy-making during crises (Eberl et al., 2018), or in the reinforcement of hate speech (Oller Alonso et al., 2021). Therefore, the role played by journalism in the proliferation of these prevailing definitions needs to be questioned, as discussed in the next section.

2. Hypotheses and research questions

In light of a review of the literature, the starting hypothesis is that any reflection by the Spanish press on the existence of a differentiated socio-political and media treatment of Afghan and Ukrainian refugees is superficial, that is to say, lacking analysis of its causes and failing to provide academic or specialised perspectives (H1). Moreover, Spanish newspapers are aware that the media attention, social assistance and political acquiescence received by Ukrainian refugees has been much greater than in the case of the Syrian or Afghan crises (H2). However, the discourse of the press is opposed to such double standards and argues that it is unjustifiable that there be hierarchies when reporting on the lives of human beings fleeing conflict (H3).

In addition to these hypotheses, this research aims to answer the following questions: what are the main topics and frames projected by the press concerning Afghan and Ukrainian refugees? What types of information sources prevail when the press reflects on the categorisation of refugees? What arguments do newspapers use when they question their own discourses regarding any differences in treatment? What differentiating nuances lie behind the reflections on said categorisation?

3. Methodology

The corpus of this study comprises 225 items of journalism from *El País*, *El Mundo*, *ABC* and *La Vanguardia*, four leading Spanish newspapers that have been selected for their history, number of readers, social influence and varied ideological approach (Reig, 2000). *La Vanguardia* is a conservative Catalan newspaper, while the other three have a more national orientation, although they are ideologically diverse: *El País* is left-wing and progressive, *ABC* is linked to Catholicism, the monarchy, traditionalism and conservative values; and *El Mundo* is considered centre-right (Martínez-Lirola, 2022; Durán, 2019).

The texts were taken from the *MyNews* platform using the search terms *refug** AND (*afgan** OR “*ucran**”), provided that they appeared in the title or subtitle to confirm the relevance of the term within the content. The journalistic genres considered are news, reportage, interviews, features, columns or opinion articles, analysis, editorials, profiles, letters to the editor and photo reports, thus the study excludes cartoons, listings, obituaries, official announcements, pastimes, etc. The interval 2002-2021 was used for the Afghan case (although 65% correspond to the year 2021) and from February 24 to April 22, 2022, for the Ukrainian case. Although the Afghan diaspora began as early as 1979, the compilation of data began in 2002 with the intention of having similar figures for both crises and thus making comparisons fair. The Ukrainian time frame was limited to the first two months of the 2022 conflict, as from then on the number of displaced persons and the subsequent media interest in this issue decreased (UNHCR, 2023c).

At an analytical level, this work combines quantitative and qualitative techniques in order to achieve the required sequentiality, reliability and level of detail, in addition to methodological triangulation (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Firstly, a quantitative content analysis was applied to describe and interpret the coverage with numbers and statistics (Piñeiro-Naval, 2020) by means of a code made up of 64 categories to classify both formal (date, newspaper, photographs, etc.) and specific aspects (subject matter, refugee testimonies, framing, etc.) for the object of study. It should be pointed out that the coding

was carried out by a single researcher, following a detailed codebook and its instruction sheet. To mitigate potential intra-coding inconsistencies, another co-author supervised approximately a quarter of the framing variables of the units of analysis, the most meaningful ones for the subsequent connotative analysis, resolving by consensus any differences of criteria that occasionally came up. This could represent a methodological limitation, but the authors believe it is mitigated by the use of a strict codebook, double-checking the coding process, and complementing the quantitative approach with qualitative analysis.

The second phase studied what Van Dijk (2018) terms *Migration Media Discourse*, that is, a critical analysis of the journalistic discourse on migration by observing languages, meanings, contexts, argumentative logic, metaphors, changes, nuances, intentions, connotations, etc. (Schreier, 2012; Van Dijk, 2018; Martínez Lirola, 2022; Zapata-Barrero, 2018). This called for an initial reading to define the measurable aspects (ideology, religion, culture, testimonies, reflections, subject matter, linguistic practices, etc.) that were then categorised in a second, more detailed reading (Ruiz Olabuénaga, 2012) and recorded in QSR NVivo, a program that facilitates qualitative data processing. The main findings are provided in the form of extracts (Palmgren et al., 2023), following a chronological pattern wherever possible, and emphasising, above all, the hierarchisation of refugees according to their origin.

As mentioned above, one of the most important issues is the study of frames, which are handled here both deductively (quantitatively) and inductively (qualitatively). Thus, Semetko & Valkenburg's proposal (2000) was first integrated into the quantitative content analysis, their design contemplates five options: attribution of responsibility, human interest, conflict, morality, and economic consequences. A new frame is added here, that, in the authors' opinion, completes the classification: that of socio-political consequences, which emphasises the consequences that a certain action can have on individuals, groups, institutions, regions or countries. At the same time, while framing theory also allows for more experimental approaches assisted by qualitative methodologies (Cools et al., 2024; Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015), inductive frames emerge from critical discourse analysis. In addition to facilitating the understanding of narratives, their biases, nuances or meanings, what is highlighted or silenced, these qualitative frames reinforce the exhaustiveness of the analysis (Ibrahim, 2010). This type of study is usually carried out with small samples, as in our case, due to the importance of contextualisation and latent discourse (Schreier, 2012).

4. Results

Firstly, the quantitative findings are presented regarding the topics and sources of information most used by the Spanish press, followed by an analysis of the main frames of media coverage, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Finally, a third section reveals the discourse and media reflection concerning the categorisation of refugees.

4.1. Topics and information sources

Of the 225 pieces of journalism, one in five (20.4%) includes a reflection on the existence of categories of refugees, understood as differences in treatment depending on their origin. Hereinafter, the results shared always correspond to the 46 units of analysis that integrate the discursive nuances that will later be externalised in the form of extracts. These reflections are more frequent in the information on the Ukrainian crisis (63%, 29 texts) than on the Afghan crisis (37%, 17 texts), and in *El Mundo* and *El País* (both with 32.6%) than in *La Vanguardia* (23.9%) or *ABC* (10.9%). Going deeper into the specifics of each

newspaper, it is noteworthy that *El País* is the only one in which the Afghan crisis (53.3%, 8 texts) appears more than the Ukrainian situation (46.7%, 7 texts), while the Ukrainian emergency takes precedence over the Afghan one in *La Vanguardia* (81.8%, 9 texts compared to 2), *ABC* (80%, 4 texts compared to 1) and *El Mundo* (60%, 9 texts compared to 6).

In the study of the topics (Table 1), it is illuminating to see that the same issues (legal matters, decisions taken by other countries or organisations, descriptions of the journey, and racism) are dealt with in both crises, with one exception: the most common topic varies. Thus, in the case of displaced Afghans, the most frequently mentioned topic refers to agreements with the European Union (41.2%), while this issue is only the sixth most common in the Ukrainian case (6.9%). On the other hand, reception and humanitarian aid is the most repeated argument when reporting on Ukrainian refugees (37.9%), occupying sixth place for Afghans (5.8%).

Table 1. Main topics in both crises (%)

Afghan crisis	%	Ukrainian crisis	%
EU agreements	41.2	Reception and humanitarian aid	37.9
Legal issues	17.6	Legal issues	13.8
Decisions of other countries or organisations	11.8	Decisions of other countries or organizations	13.8
Description of the journey	11.8	Description of the journey	10.3
Racism	11.8	Racism	10.3
Reception and humanitarian aid	5.8	EU agreements	6.9
Total	100	Total	93

Source: created by the authors

As for the sources of information, after reviewing the two leading sources that include reflection in the texts about both crises (regardless of whether they come from news or opinion sections), it is found that the media itself is the most common source for both Afghans (38.1%) and Ukrainians (34.9%). For the former, the other relevant sources are the European Union (16.5%), testimonies of refugees or migrants (14.5%), the United Nations (11.5%), civil society, i.e. NGOs, the Church and religious sources, experts, academics, think tanks, unions, lawyers, readers, etc. (9.7%), and the governments of other countries (9.7%). In contrast, the Ukrainian crisis is reported from the point of view of civil society (18.3%), official Spanish sources (14.7%), testimonies (13.2%), governments of other countries (10.9%), police forces (2%), the European Union (2%), the United Nations (2%) and other sources of information (2%). The data shows that the latter crisis has a more domestic or national character than the former, which is more dependent on international sources.

4.2. Media frames

The differences in treatment are clarified by studying the frequency of appearance of the frames adapted from Semetko & Valkenburg (2000). Table 2 shows that conflict (64.7%) and the attribution of responsibility (23.5%) are characteristic of Afghan refugees, while coverage of displaced Ukrainians leaves room for more frames. In the accounts concerning Ukraine, attribution of responsibility is predominant (37.9%), while conflict is attenuated (6.9%), whereas human interest (24.1%), morality (13.8%) and sociopolitical consequences (13.8%) are highlighted, three nuances that are barely present when reporting on Afghans. It should be remembered that, in this measurement of the frames, just as with the topics, only the priority is recorded among all those that may occur in a piece, that is, the most prominent, visible and perceptible frame in the text or in the heading, subtitle, introduction or summary of the same.

From a qualitative point of view, the relevance of the conflict frame in the Afghan case is clearly reflected throughout the sample analysed. It is sometimes related to the country itself, Afghanistan, “bathed in violence for decades” (Gutiérrez, 11 September 2015), and on other occasions, to the situations experienced by Afghans on their journey or once on European soil. For this second case, in a text that narrated the aggression perpetrated by young members of Golden Dawn, the Greek “ultra-right”, “neo-Nazi” party, there is talk of “fire for refugees on the streets of Lesbos”, of attacks on “Afghan immigrants stranded on an island which they cannot leave”, or of “women sleeping in diapers to avoid going to the latrines and being raped” (Rojas, 24 April 2018).

Table 2. Main frames in both crises (%)

Frame	Afghan crisis	Ukrainian crisis
Attribution of responsibility	23.5	37.9
Human interest	5.9	24.1
Conflict	64.7	6.9
Morality	5.9	13.8
Economic consequences	0	3.5
Socio-political consequences	0	13.8
Total	100	100

Source: created by the authors

Furthermore, the conflict also serves to represent European Manichaeism in crisis management, as if it were a fight: “The Afghan crisis reverberates in Europe with two factions facing each other over the potential coming avalanche of refugees” (Abril & Pérez, August 31, 2021). The two political “factions” that clash are grouped into “the humanitarian face” that sought “specific commitments and to establish quotas and shares,” and the security face, typical “of countries in favour of sealing borders, fearful that any gesture of openness could generate a call effect that would make old ghosts reappear.” This duality is found in another item: the Europe of the “values” and “rights” of people is confronted with that of “fear,” “migratory panic,” “security” or “call effect” (Pérez, September 5, 2021). The Afghans and their crisis were caught in the middle, “the ghost ... that has reopened all the scars, all the poorly-healed wounds, all the fault lines in an EU that remains an idea in search of reality.”

The attribution of responsibility is the second most projected frame in the Afghan case and can be seen in an opinion piece that subscribes to the idea that “the world must welcome Afghan asylum seekers”, that “the United States must face its share, in proportion to its enormous responsibility in this humanitarian catastrophe” (Naïr, August 28, 2021). This frame has always been more common in political texts, such as when the European Union announced its commitment to welcome 37,000 Afghans, of whom 2,500 would arrive in Spain, an agreement that was praised by the heads of the European institutions or the member states of the Union (Abril, December 10, 2021).

Human interest and morality are the other frames present in the case of the Afghans. The first is clearly seen in a report posted from Athens and based on the experiences of Mohamed Ali, a 34-year-old Afghan who fled with his family because they had no “future” in their country, or of Imran Hussein, another Afghan in his twenties who wanted to reach Germany (Gutiérrez, September 11, 2015). The same thing happens in “The defeat of Genghis Khan’s ‘grandchildren’” an article that recounts the journey of Hamid and many other families of Hazara refugees, “one of the most persecuted minorities in the world” (Rojas, December 3, 2015). On the other hand, an editorial criticising “Europe’s double language when it becomes a magnet for millions of people and communities affected by persecution and despair” is from a moral perspective; with the challenge being described as “colossal” (*El País*, 22 August 2021). Given that such moral arguments are among the hypotheses questioned in this study, more speeches of this nature are presented in the following section.

The Ukrainian case, on the other hand, rests on a wider variety of frames, although coverage is dominated by the attribution of responsibility for several reasons. That is sometimes because Vladimir Putin is pointed to as the cause of the new circumstances for so many thousands of people (Rojas, February 26, 2022), but in other cases because a country, a city or a politician is involved in helping (Roces, February 27, 2022; Medialdea, March 8, 2022; López, March 20, 2022; Pita, April 7, 2022). Responsibility is once again evident when the European Union reacts favourably to protect Ukrainians in contrast to past crises (Suanzes, 4 March 2022; Alberich et al., 22 April 2022), but also when Boris Johnson, British Prime Minister at the time, is not as supportive as his European colleagues in terms of control and verification (Fresneda, 8 March 2022).

Secondly, the coverage is presented from a human-interest perspective, that is, from the personal stories of those who have suffered the consequences of the Russian invasion. Such is the reality of a group of African women bound for Poland, whose testimony gives the title to a report: “«We all went together for fear of being raped by the Russians»” (Rojas, March 1, 2022). Or that of the Makohou family, whose mother, Luda, shortly after crossing the border with Poland, claimed that she had “not had time to cry” because she had to “be strong” for her children (Segura, February 27, 2022). Another of these stories is that of Denis, a thirty-something “citizen of the enemy power that has invaded the country in which he resides”, who preferred to follow his Ukrainian wife on her way to Slovakia or Poland rather than return to Russia (Segura, March 3, 2022). Romania was the choice of Faith Igogo and her husband Sahdrach, 33-year-old Nigerians, who were grateful for the help they have received in their new destination (Pita & Costa, March 6, 2022). Finally, it is worth highlighting the experience of Waleed, a twenty-something Pakistani aeronautical engineering student in Kiev, who fled with his wife and a female friend, and who was waiting for shelter at a Berlin train station after three sleepless nights of travel and having been the victim of discrimination at the border. This is how he described his journey in *El País*: “We came to Europe to build a future for ourselves and now we find ourselves as refugees of war with a very bleak future” (Sevillano, March 11, 2022).

The moral burden is also present in some parts of the coverage. It appears, in particular, to denounce that the magnificent treatment received by Ukrainian refugees should be the norm for anybody in need, and it comes, almost always, attributed to illustrious figures, such as Pope Francis (Martínez-Brocal, April 4, 2022) or Abdulrazak Gurnah, Nobel Prize for Literature in 2021 (Ayén, March 23, 2022). Ultimately, these texts raise a humanistic reflection on the existence of categories of refugees, a subject that is discussed at length in the following section.

Another representative frame in the Ukrainian crisis is that of socio-political consequences, a new addition here to Semetko & Valkenburg's proposal (2000). It can be clearly seen in a report that describes the Hungarian management of the Ukrainian crisis, and which questions the decisions of "Viktor Orbán's ultra-conservative government", who, despite having "been slow to react", decided to welcome "the Ukrainians as he did not do with the Syrians in the 2015 crisis" (López, March 30, 2022). Testimonies are cited, such as the one that suggests that it is merely an electioneering measure, or that, in the opinion of the leader of Fidesz, the majority of those who fled to Western Europe in 2015 did not do so "for reasons of safety", but because they wanted to live in Germany". The relevance of this frame is perfectly illustrated in one type of journalistic narrative: the style that describes the large number of Ukrainians arriving and the challenges this is causing in the host society, both in Spain, where, for example, the hiring of Ukrainian interpreters is encouraged to help with the integration of refugee children at school (Sanmartín, March 31, 2022), and in other contexts such as Poland (Sevillano, March 11, 2022), Mexico or the United States (Sánchez Olmos, March 21, 2022; Peirón, April 10, 2022).

Unlike the Afghan crisis, the conflict frame is not a priority here when focusing on the meaning of the texts. That does not mean that it is not present in the coverage, something impossible when the basis is the invasion of a country and the subsequent armed conflict; what happens is that others take precedence, as explained above. However, it does occur on certain occasions due to the way in which the journalist presents arguments or chooses testimonies, as happens with a news item where it is reported that the "French extremist candidate" Eric Zemmour asked for "the refugees to be left in Poland" (Val, March 1, 2022). Finally, the same circumstance that accompanies the conflict frame is repeated with that of economic consequences. The exception is found in pieces such as the one entitled "Ukrainian refugees receive help to pay the rent" (Martín, April 14, 2022).

4.3. The categorisation of refugees

This section offers some examples of cases in which the Spanish press pondered the existence of categories of refugee or double standards in their treatment. In other words, this section presents the journalistic discourse on intellectual and humanistic (moral or ethical) reflections on the existence of refugees who experience greater or lesser acceptance by host societies.

Examining the Afghan case since 2002, the maxim that there are first- and second-class refugees is already apparent from the 2015 Mediterranean crisis. At least this headline puts it so: "Afghans, second-class refugees" (Gutiérrez, 11 September 2015). The reason was that "EU emergency measures give priority to Syrians, Eritreans and Iraqis". On other occasions, it was the Afghans who received preferential treatment, as reflected in the report "You can go through... You to the cage" (Rojas, 21 November 2015), which recognised the fortune of the Afghans in gaining access to the Balkan countries in their European dream. The reason for this was that they had been displaced by war, just as the Iraqis and Syrians had. A different reception faced other less fortunate refugees or economic migrants (especially from Morocco, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Congo, Liberia,

Algeria, Sri Lanka or Sudan), with “the cage” waiting for them prior to their return to the “previous border”. However, a change in the Greek regulations declaring that Afghanistan was no longer a country at war, changed their status and, from February 2016, Afghans were left without the option to continue along the Balkan route (valid only for Syrians and Iraqis), which left a new title awaiting many: that of being “vagrants” (Rojas, February 26, 2016). Three years after the first salvos of the crises, it was the Afghans who were reduced to the same status as the “Moroccans, Algerians or Pakistanis,” collectives “from countries that are not at war, which makes it difficult for them to be recognised as refugees” (Rojas, April 24, 2018).

Among people of the same nationality, hierarchisation may respond to different criteria that vary from sex or age to religion or ethnicity. Such was the case of the Hazaras of Afghanistan, with “slanted eyes” or “Mongol-looking,” predominantly Shiite and from the Bamiyan region (Rojas, December 3, 2015). As this text recalled, “it is not easy to be a refugee, but it is more difficult to be one if you are an Afghan Hazara”. The compassionate discourse touched on other occasions on Afghan women, as when the deputy mayor of Madrid, Begoña Villacís, denounced that many continued to live “the true terror of being there” (Roces, February 27, 2022).

The solidarity and humanitarianism announced by European politicians, recalled in an editorial in *El País*, clashed with the practical reality that refugees discovered on their way to Eden: “railings,” “surveillance systems,” “watchtowers,” “thermal cameras,” “electronic surveillance” or “a five-metre fence” (*El País*, 22 August 2021). Perhaps for this reason, famous names such as Sami Nair (28 August 2021) denounce that “Afghan refugees not only call for the duty of human solidarity, but for the recognition of the right to aid, an emblem of the civilisation that we claim to represent”. His openly compassionate speech affirmed that Afghans were “humble citizens” who “plead for solidarity,” “helpless people, who had believed in an Afghanistan free from the violence of the Taliban and embarked with the dream of a system that respected human dignity”. In essence, Europe was at a crossroads between, on the one hand, the “values” and “rights” of people and, on the other, “fear,” “migratory panic,” “security” or the “call effect,” something reprehensible in the eyes of a researcher at the Centre for European Reform who stated that “there is a lot of hypocrisy in Europe” (Pérez, September 5, 2021).

However, since the very first news item about the Ukrainian crisis, a more favourable attitude towards those fleeing that country can be perceived. Poland’s attitude, for example, was considerably more empathetic, given that, as one report put it, “the border barrier” was opened for all Ukrainians and their pets, “without the need for documentation, a Covid certificate or insurance” (Rojas, February 26, 2022). Only a few months earlier, during the 2021 crisis that pitted Poland and Belarus against each other when President Lukashenko, “Putin’s ally, transferred migrants from countries in conflict such as Iraq or Afghanistan to the border,” the Polish authorities had “aggressively” blocked their entry (Segura, February 27, 2022). Another journalist criticised that Polish society was showing itself to be “as generous with culturally kindred countries” as it was “not in 2015-2016 with a few thousand Muslim migrants” (Pita, 7 April 2022). In fact, the Ukrainian crisis revealed a truth described by an Indian university student who had just set foot in Poland: “There are two queues, one for Ukrainians and one for foreigners. For every 50 Ukrainians, more or less two foreigners come through. The colour of your skin doesn’t matter. You go to one line or another depending on your passport” (Rojas, 1 March 2022). Almost metaphorically, these two lines support the thesis of the two categories of refugees.

Similar accounts have come from the border between Mexico and the United States. The Ukrainian “new wave” brought major changes with respect to other crises experienced “with the Central Americans in 2018, with the Haitians, after the assassination of Jovenel Moise, and with the Venezuelans and Cubans, at different times in recent years,” as “its members are blonder, have white skin and travel in better conditions,” although they “come face to face with the *bureaucratic wall* that the United States has raised on its border since the pandemic broke out” (Sánchez Olmos, March 21, 2022). It is hardly surprising that two testimonies acknowledged, firstly, that the new migrants had “greater facilities than other nationalities”, something which had “never” happened with “a Central American family,” and, second, that although it is “a little cruel, ... if Africans come here, they won’t be given any favouritism, but since these people are blond, they are allowed in.” The same was said a few weeks later in another news report that described how Ukrainians who wanted to enter the United States came across on their journey “many other desperate immigrants from various countries, especially Honduras and Haiti, who were not faced with the same facilities to enter their destination” (Peirón, April 10).

It was mentioned above that Pope Francis and Abdulrazak Gurnah played a categorical role in criticising the categorisation of people, and double standards in solidarity with those in need. After a trip to Malta where he met a number of immigrants, the Christian leader asked European leaders to open “the doors” to “those who arrive from the Mediterranean” just as they did with those coming from Ukraine (Martínez-Brocal, April 4, 2022). For his part, the 2021 Nobel Prize winner for Literature, when asked about Ukrainians, replied that “they are relatively lucky that, at least, they have found understanding and support in neighbouring countries, it is sad that not all peoples in similar situations are taken in like that,” remembering “Afghans, Syrians and Iraqis” (Ayén, March 23, 2022). The South African writer sees the problem as being that in some areas of Europe, “there is a suspicion of strangers”, this being “nothing new”, and its origin was “the distance that is felt towards people who come, especially if they are from the south”, which constitutes a “racist phenomenon”. Finally, excluding Germany, Spain or Portugal from these areas so lacking in solidarity, Gurnah remarked that “in other countries they have been spoken of as criminals, as people who come to ruin our prosperity”.

Some of these ideas are compiled in an editorial entitled “The agile reception of Ukrainian refugees”, the agility of which was due, above all, to the policy of “open borders, something that did not happen in the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis”, or to the fact that Europeans considered Ukrainians as “neighbours” and abhorred “Putin’s aggression” (*La Vanguardia*, April 2, 2022). The editorial positively highlighted that, in Spain, “a significant part of the Ukrainian children who have arrived in our country – 90% of those who have escaped the country under bombs are women and children – are already in school, and can ask for treatment, like their elders, from the public health system”. The article ended by questioning double standards by pointing out that some NGOs were calling for “equal treatment for immigrants of other origins”, referring to “North Africans, sub-Saharan, Syrians, etc. who risk their lives to reach Spain”. It stressed that “they are refugees just like the Ukrainians, and are human beings like them, but they do not receive the same help”.

Finally, with the paradigm of “institutional racism” as a backdrop, the thesis of double standards was outlined in an opinion article signed by Colectivo Treva i Pau denouncing that, “despite declarations of human rights, religious preaching..., being a refugee in Europe is not the same as being a European refugee” (Alberich et al., April 22, 2022). The authors recalled that, in 2015, “with the intelligent, exemplary exception of Germany, we witnessed a shameful haggling to ‘share’ a few thousand refugees, and that some countries refused to take in even one, breaking the agreement”. On the other hand, they emphasised

that “many Spanish cities – the key player in the generation of shared citizenship – have been acquiring considerable know-how in the management of cultural diversity and social cohesion, largely applying an intercultural paradigm”. The article ended with “two requests”: first, that the “comparative grievance” represented by “the queues at immigration offices for processing work or residence permits” be eliminated, when the Ukrainian crisis had demonstrated that they can be issued in 24 hours; and second, that “the collapse of the child protection system in the Canary Islands could, with everyone pulling together, be resolved immediately.”

5. Conclusions

Throughout these pages, it has become clear that the Spanish press has provided a differentiated treatment of the two refugee crises analysed from the perspective of intellectual reflection that focused on the existence of two categories of refugees or, in other words, refugees better or worse accepted by the host societies. From a quantitative perspective, on the occasions when this reflection appears (it arises in around 20% of cases), the people who fled Afghanistan figure mainly concerning topics of international information (European Union agreements), media and international sources of information (European Union, United Nations and governments of other countries), and within frames that highlight the conflict and the attribution of responsibility. In addition to this same attribution of responsibility, the newspaper texts that deal with the Ukrainian crisis are also framed around human interest, moral or socio-political consequences, something that rarely occurred in the case of the Afghans. As regards subject matter, the pieces that touch on Ukrainians deal mainly with reception and humanitarian aid and are reported, above all, from closer sources of information, such as civil society, official Spanish sources, testimonies or the media themselves. So, if we look only at numerical or quantitative parameters, one of the conclusions that we draw is that Afghans are dehumanised in comparison with Ukrainians.

The Afghan crisis also shows that information is topical, and that reflection is scarce. It should be remembered that in order to draw up a broad retrospective of coverage, our research went back to 2002 and, with a few exceptions in which the texts had a more highly opinionated or interpretive content (editorials, columns or interviews), the pieces examined were mostly news, reports or features, almost always dependent on highly-newsworthy events. This reality cannot be proven with the Ukrainian case, since the time interval observed was much shorter than for the Afghan case.

The differences in how the two crises were dealt with are more noticeable from a discursive and qualitative perspective. To avoid repeating the ideas expressed in the previous sections, a joint, critical and inductive reading is proposed here for each context. Firstly, regarding Afghanistan, the media and political discourse revolves around the fact that this is not a “version 2.0” of the 2015 Mediterranean refugee crisis, which brought hundreds of thousands of individuals to Europe, principally from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Although the memory of that crisis is palpable in the content of the texts, reporters and politicians (as sources of information) do not give the Afghan crisis of 2021 the alarmist and security-related tone that was raised in the review of the literature. In fact, some pieces clearly underlined that the Afghan crisis was not comparable to that of 2015 and that it should be handled completely differently by Europe. At its core, the Afghan crisis is a European crisis, a community issue characterised by two news frames: the “quota” policy adopted by European countries for the distribution of refugees, and the “factionalism” that split Europe into two blocks. On one side, the reluctant group including Poland, Hungary, Austria,

the Czech Republic or Slovakia, and on the other, the rest, albeit more in “words” than “in deeds”. Because the prevailing media discourse was that the European Union’s management of the situation by was not living up to the standard set by its founding charter. In short, hospitality did not carry the day. As far as Spain is concerned, instead of detailed self-criticism of its performance, the newspapers opted for a discourse of “passing the buck”, that is, insisting that the “bad guys” were the “others”, the censors, placing the responsibility squarely on the block of Poland, Hungary, etc.

In general terms, media coverage of the Ukrainian crisis transcends the international to the point of being humanised and domesticated (it is brought closer to our daily lives), because one of the favoured readings is that this crisis poses a direct question to Spanish, European and Western society, the United States included. Apart from being perceived among the typologies of news items, topics, information sources and frames, this discourse is based on a singular reality: that being a Ukrainian refugee is not the same as being a person (foreigner or migrant) fleeing the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, something that is indubitably revealed in the articles and reports posted from the countries bordering Ukraine. The dehumanisation of these second-class foreigners and migrants is manifest in the difficulties they encounter in entering Poland and other neighbouring countries, something that does not happen with Ukrainian women, children and even “pets.” For this reason, some texts openly expressed the existence of a certain institutional racism, in Spain as well, due to those specific measures that favoured Ukrainians and which those other refugees and collectives did not enjoy; whether from cities that did their utmost to welcome refugees or from help paying the rent, from actions to ease the hiring of translators in schools to “express regulations”. Finally, when parallels had to be drawn, the comparative pattern for Ukrainians was the 2015 crisis, not the Afghan one. And in this sense, the press recognised the solidarity and humanity of Spain, Europe and the entire Western world.

This study has demonstrated that being an Afghan refugee is not the same as being a Ukrainian refugee, just as being Hazara is not the same as being Afghan, or being a man is not the same as being a woman or a child. There are human categories just as there are conditions and situations that are unfavourable for some people, whatever the context or the crisis. Moreover, depending on the area of the planet, the “others” change. If in Europe they are Moors, sub-Saharan, Arabs, etc., in North America they are Haitians, Hondurans, Venezuelans, Cubans, etc. In this game, Ukrainians are welcome, and Afghans are always less welcome. The same thing occurs in Iran and Turkey, according to some of the Afghans who recounted their journeys. However, contrary to what might be expected, Islam, as the majority religion of Afghans, has never been an obvious factor in justifying or criticising the categorisation of refugees, nor have other ideological or cultural nuances.

For all these reasons, it can be seen that the Spanish press is fully aware that there are hierarchies of refugees in the social and political atmosphere, some better and others worse. Far from affirming that the paradigm of categorisation is shared or encouraged by the media studied, one of the findings of this work is that, due to their silence, these newspapers do not perform self-criticism of the consequences of their coverage and evade their responsibility for the effect of their information or their attitude. In other words, perhaps because it would be throwing stones in their own glass houses, the newspapers do not feel responsible for the fact that society sees Afghans and Ukrainians in a different light, nor that their discourse is decisive in public opinion or in decision- and policy-making (in the so-called “agenda”), something that would not sit well with their social responsibility.

Returning to the hypotheses, it can be confirmed that the Spanish press does not analyse the causes nor provide academic or specialised perspectives when reflecting on the existence of different socio-political and media treatment of Afghan and Ukrainian refugees, which translates into a superficial discourse (H1). On the other hand, as already noted, we do consider that the newspapers studied are aware that the media attention, social assistance and political acquiescence that Ukrainian refugees have received is not equivalent to other crises, especially the Afghan one, as it is one of those examined in this work (H2). Finally, we argue that, in cases where this has been expressed, almost always in editorial and opinion articles, through testimonies from expert voices or through reporters' interpretation, the discourse of the Spanish press is contrary to the existence of double standards and argues that it is unjustifiable that hierarchies exist when reporting on human beings fleeing conflicts (H3), although without taking responsibility for its own role in this.

Future studies may well focus on other aspects of discourse (such as images) or on broadening the spectrum of reflection on refugee categories to other crises (war or not) such as that of 2015, the Sudanese, the Rohingya, the Venezuelan or, why not, the most recent Palestinian crisis. Likewise, this perspective could serve as a basis for drawing comparisons with migratory movements of a more economic (or even climate-related or environmental) nature than war, given that these are the ones that usually concern Spain.

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7. Specific contributions of each author

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Data collection and analysis	Cayetano Fernández Romero and Alfonso Corral
Discussion and conclusions	Alfonso Corral
Drafting, formatting, version review and approval	Cayetano Fernández Romero, Antonio Prieto-Andrés and Alfonso Corral

8. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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