## SOME MEDIA PERSPECTIVES ON EUROPE'S MIGRATION CRISIS

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Absract: World media has been generous in offering multiple perspectives on the acute crisis of migration in Europe. The lenses though which the phenomenon is viewed offer diverse interpretations of the causes and effects of the crisis while history is being written. The present study tries to analyze some of the opinion pieces published in The New York Times on this subject focusing on how the media representations of the issue contribute to identifying the geopolitical and cultural challenges of the EU.

Keywords: media representation, opinion, Europe, migration crisis, moral, political, The New York Times

## Introduction

"If the European Union does not do better on dealing with migration from Africa, it will further damage to its credibility as a model of democracy and human rights", states *The New York Times*' editorial "Europe and Migration from Africa" in May 2016.

Bono, U2's lead singer, writes an opinion piece for *The New York Times* in April 2016, after visiting some refugee camps in Kenya, Jordan and Turkey in order to "highlight the universal nature of the crisis", as the newspaper mentions. He declares: "I've recently returned from the Middle East and East Africa, where I visited a number of refugee camps — car parks of humanity. I went as an activist and as a European. Because Europeans have come to realize — quite painfully in the past year or two — that the mass exodus from collapsed countries like Syria is not just a Middle Eastern or African problem, it's a European problem. It's an American one, too. It affects us all".

Both references point to one of the acute problems of Europe: the migration/ refugee crisis. *BBC News* mentions that, according to The International Organization for Migration, more than one million reached Europe in 2015, compared to only 280000 arrivals in 2014. The phenomenon is not new but it has accelerated in the past two years turning into "the largest movement of people that Europe has seen since 1945", says *Financial Times*.

The quotations above identify at least two facets of the phenomenon as a 'problem': one the one hand, it is a continental issue that questions the identity and credibility of the EU which is expected to provide the migrants with shelter, security and the prospect of a better life, to help them adapt and integrate and at the same time to moderate and regulate the clashes between them as minority and the majority or, in other words, between civilizations and cultures that are not ready to cope; one the other hand, it is an individual (and eventually a universal) issue because it is all about humanity and equality, about being humane and altruistic, about understanding and helping those in need. Conceptually speaking, this equals the dichotomies 'politics vs. ethics', in relation to human rights and human dignity.

The present paper does not intend to study any history of the phenomenon or identify the causes and effects of the migration crisis in relation to the EU or to the individual, including the values implied here, but rather, by means of a qualitative content analysis, in an exploratory research, to see how some opinion texts view and frame the political and ethical challenges addressed by the issue at stake. It is to debate on the judgements formulated by some opinion writers in The New York Times in the period 1 January 2015 – 10 May 2016, covering the interval that registered the greatest EU migrant influx. It is to focus on some understandings of the dichotomy 'politics – ethics' in the problem of the EU migration crisis and the way in which the arguments for and against the two implications (political intervention and/ or moral considerations) affect the framing of the phenomenon. The New York Times web search query generated eight articles on the subject, using the following filters: the date range (mentioned above), articles (as type of text), any author, the opinion section of the paper and the key terms 'Europe migration crisis moral political'. One of the eight articles is not topically relevant because it refers to the historical dimensions of migration in the USA. The rest of the seven articles have been sorted chronologically in order to analyze the gradual formation of representation in relation to the sense of acuteness of the crisis generated by the perceptions of the gap between political actions and moral regards.

# Migration: some political and ethical controversies

Mark J. Miller in *The Prevention of Unauthorized Migration* explains the dichotomy politics – morality at the beginning of his study "The prevention of unauthorized migration". In his view, regulating international migration "is not inherently morally objectionable" because governments are obliged to maintain public order and this requirement intersects with immigration regulation; therefore, states Miller, unauthorized migration should be prevented, this being "a customary prerogative of sovereign states", reflecting "the basic rights of states and their citizens to determine who should be admitted into the country as residents and future citizens" (1999, p. 20). Giving and holding citizens to this set of rights results in denying immigrants some fundamental rights and this entails ethical considerations.

About the morality of immigration speaks Mathias Risse in a study published in *Ethics &* International Affairs and his foremost argument is that "the earth belongs to humanity in common", it is "collectively owned", and this why immigration should be seen in the context of global justice (2008). Evidently, the equation applies to liberal states in which individual attitudes are the hallmark of functionality and where these are denied only if they threaten the state. Risse explains the simple hypothesis that complicates matters here: "why it would be acceptable in the first place (especially to those thus excluded) that we draw an imaginary line in the dust or adopt the course of a river and think of that as a border". Is this what gives one the right to consider himself as the legitimate owner of that land/citizen of that state? This would be the basic 'moral question'. And, according to Risse, this interrogation relativizes the idea of 'illegal immigration as wrong' only because it means breaking the law: "from a moral standpoint not all ways of breaking the law are to be condemned" (2008). According to this theory, immigration implies moral issues based on the relativity of 'earth ownership'. Ethical views of the phenomenon are denser when it comes to impelled migration; people who are forced to migrate, to leave their country in order to save their lives, because of civil wars or of starvation, are not only denied basic human rights but also human dignity. What to do with such desperate people who risk their lives trying to enter Europe? Act individually or collectively? What to do with the migrants when some public opinion associates them with another acute European and universal problem, terrorism? Is recent migration Europe's enemy? Moreover, what to do with

the inevitable cultural discords between the included and the excluded, generated by the mutual reluctance to change?

Policies and public opinion do not seem to be able to provide solutions to the crisis. As Kenan Malik finds (in "Europe's immigration bind: how to act morally while heeding the will of its people" published by *The Guardian*), the crisis will not be solved in the near future because the moral, the workable and the democratic cannot be tied together quickly; furthermore, "the immigration debate cannot be won simply by debating immigration" (2016).

## Samples of opinion on the European migration crisis. The New York Times

As mentioned above, media has generated incisive perspectives on the crisis of migration. Since it is a controversial and debatable issue, it mostly invites comments and opinions about all the problematic aspects involved: for and against the EU (not only) in the problem of migration, pro and con migrants and public hostility, for and against the conflicting needs and desires of the people involved, pro and con immigration policy in general, for or against moral considerations of the phenomenon etc. Hence, a rhetorical question: have editorials and columns, opinion writing in general, patterned public opinion and social re/action, providing views and frames on the morality or immorality of any possible immigration policy that is to intersect with European identity and cultural politics, with democratic values in general? To quote from Writing Opinion for Impact (Conrad Fink, 2004): "editorial writing has the potential to start a war – or avoid one"; opinion writing is, says Conrad Fink, "subjective advocacy writing" leading readers "through fact and fiction to the truth" knowing that "some paths are wrong, others right" and that "some solutions are better than others" (p. 4). Opinion writing, states The National Conference of Editorial Writers (quoted in Fink, p. 7), "is to provide the information and guidance toward sound judgements that are essential to the healthy functioning of a democracy". 'Guidance' and 'judgements' here imply the force of the 'word' in opinion texts constructed so as to be argumentative discourses that make use of all possible persuasive and rhetorical instruments in order to determine writers and readers to socially construct 'reality', to provide a certain weltanschauung by making them re/act in the theatre of events. With Walter Lippmann, this translates as: "the triangular relationship between the scene of action, the human picture of that scene, and the human response to that picture working itself out upon the scene of action" (p. 17).

In what follows, the present study will identify some understandings of the dichotomy 'politics – ethics' in the problem of the EU migration crisis, concentrating on the arguments that evaluate *political action* and *moral examination*, thus providing frames of the phenomenon.

Ivan Krastev identifies Eastern Europe's compassion deficit in his opinion article: countries like Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary have turned from post-Communist societies into transit countries and this, coupled with the migration crisis problem, creates a new European problem – the split between "its eastern and western halves". Opposed to the Western public, deeply moved by the scenes of drowned migrants, the Eastern European public "remains unmoved", says Krastev, based on the decision of their leaders to 'lambast' Brussel's decision to redistribute refugees among EU member states and to build walls on borders, and based on some leaked emails asking televisions networks to avoid showing images of children that would "soften their people's hearts and bring about, heaven forbid, compassion". The text blames on Eastern Europe for having lost any sense of solidarity; moreover, opposite solidarity seems to be Donald Trump ("a more appropriate symbol for Eastern Europe would be a bumper sticker reading 'Eastern Europe: Where Donald Trump comes off looking good"); other attributes associated with Eastern Europe in relation to the migration crisis are disappointment, distrust, demography, democracy, "pervasive cynicism", self-pity, incurious, insular; these, explains Krastev, only because Eastern Europeans have been driven by the prospect of prosperity once in the EU, which would mean "caring for [y]our own, and not a whit for the aliens", and also because of expecting "tourists, not refugees"; Krastev explains that people like those in Bulgaria have no idea about "the apocalyptic dimensions" of what is happening in Syria because the Bulgarian television did not have the money or the interest to send reporters to countries in the Middle East or Africa, torn by wars and poverty; the words chosen for defining the attitude of Eastern Europe in relation to migrants are: "moral panic", the fear for "ethnic disappearance", i.e. "existential melancholy", democracies characterized by the "clash of solidarities: national, ethnic and religious solidarity chafing against our obligations as human beings". The overall conclusion of the article is that, in relation to politics, the migration crisis threatens the EU project, and in moral terms, compassion does not solve such problems. Furthermore, the solution seems to be enrooted in the idea of universal citizenship, which implies that poor countries have to offer shelter to those in need and that rich countries open borders for all, which is, for the moment, impossible.

"How Europe's Other Half Lives", signed by Noemi Szecsi, offers a Hungarian view of the crisis; compared to Hungarians (some of whom killing themselves in railway stations out of melancholy, says Szecsi), Syrian refugees (blocked on the tracks and forced to stay in Hungary in detention camps, while on their way to Austria) are seen as "hungry for life" but not for the type of life Hungary can offer. Examples of moral considerations of the problem ("good will toward these poor creatures") are given in relation to volunteers and "the mounds of donated goods" in opposition to Hungarian intellectuals who only "parade their own narcissistic love of humanity and their disgust with the government", not possessing compassion by birth and only faking it; politicians are also seen in negative terms: "these leaders' cruel charm", drinking in bars that "trade on a faded Austro-Hungarian glory" and who give up political correctness after a few drinks, which is when they speak of the "dirty mob" and the "blasted fence"; the government is associated with "aggressive self-defense and hidden self-hatred"; because of them does public opinion see Hungarians as "the bad guys". The conclusion of the article is that people have to revise the notions of migration, Europe and European, coming along with "I don't always know what to think" - a generic assumption that the crisis and the EU need reconsiderations but often there are no answers to such challenges.

David Miliband explains how the U.S. can welcome refugees; the moral standpoint, belonging to the people, comes once more against the political one: "many citizens are ahead of their government when it comes to responding to the tide of human misery coming from the Middle East"; the article comments on the numbers of refugees that the U.S. plan to increase compared to what the country has done since 1975 (sheltering three million refugees); next, the text enumerates some of the successful strategies of the USA in resettling refugees: big hearted citizens, a combination of public and private resources, legislative framework, security checks, funding for initial housing, case management and language training, volunteer programs, refugees seen not as burden but as contributors to society – economic self-sufficiency (by helping them get employment), education for the refugee children, naturalization and the gaining of citizenship; since the USA has taken, historically, 50% of the world's refugees, it demonstrates that it has the potential to offer resettlement and thus a solution to the problem, in comparison to Europe that lacks the necessary political will and "the funding to back it up", says Miliband; this migration crisis is a "humanitarian crisis", in his terms; in other words, the text is an invitation for the USA politicians to be less cautions and more determined in doing what

"many generous, civic-minded Americans" would do in order to confirm "the nation's commitment to its moral and international responsibilities".

"Hungary's Politics of Hate", signed by Istvan Rev, is a sharp attack against the Hungarian political viewpoint, action and the indifference and arrogance of politicians and right extremists: "While journalists flocked to cover the chaos at Budapest's Keleti Station and thousands of refugees marched on foot along the M1 motorway toward the Austrian border, Viktor Orban, the prime minister of Hungary, was watching the Hungary-Romania soccer match from his V.I.P. box in the Budapest football stadium. Before the kickoff, Hungarian and Romanian 'ultras' shouted Nazi slogans and fought one another at the stadium, after having warmed up by harassing, insulting and beating up hundreds of hopelessly exhausted refugees, who, in their panic, had mistaken the noise of fireworks for gunshots". Rev connects the events with the 2018 electoral campaign that is to follow and it warns about the threat of radicalism, racism, xenophobia and nationalist populism, which is not only a Hungarian but also a European problem; "keeping Europe Christian", Orban's dictum, comes along the West lapsing "into moral relativism, multiculturalism and same-sex marriage" – and from here the contradiction in terms, for it seems, explains Rev with sarcasm, that "the only way to defend the traditions of Christianity is to make an alliance with the East, joining Vladimir Putin's crusade against the decadent West"; building razor-wire fences and passing laws that send illegal migrants in prison for years mean hatred and fear; seeing enemies at the gates and within is what is worst in this crisis; the article clearly splits the antagonistic forces: "the good-hearted Hungarians" versus the shameless government.

Geert Wilders argues over mass immigration policies and national identity in "Let the Dutch Vote on Immigration Policy"; in relation to the terrorist attacks in Paris, this text sees the mass immigration from Islamic countries and the EU open border policies as wrong and unsafe; this especially because they determine changes without recognition with regard to national identity; mass immigration is unpopular, shows a poll in the Netherlands in 2008 ("ordinary people are well aware of that" but political elites tend to "distrust the opinion of ordinary people" because of seeing them driven by "dark instincts and unjustified fears" rather than by "rational choices"; and, opposed to them, European voters are highly educated and cannot be "fooled or manipulated"); Wilders identifies two core problems of the EU: the gap between people and their national governments and parliaments ("Europe's political elite has lost touch with the people")

and the migration crisis as an existential crisis leading to "the dilution of national identity and the loss of security" (when the EU has already "robbed member nations of their sovereignty" and "the right to their own asylum policies"); the solution would be: leaving the EU, says the author; migrants are associated with "people from a less liberal and less secular culture" and with terrorism; Wilders even formulates the idea of "genuine refugees" who should be provided a "safe haven" but in their own region, among fellow Muslims; he eventually explains that his statements are the beliefs of the party he supports, i.e. the text is propaganda against the EU, for nationalism and a plea for "the wisdom of the people", namely for direct democracy and referendums.

Human rights are the thesis of Nils Muiznieks' article titled "Stop Your Backsliding, Europe". Safeguarding human rights is an international order resulting after WWII, says the text in the beginning; European nations have "probably", says Muiznieks, the best array of rules on the treatment of refugees and on human rights; the problem is that the EU responds chaotically to the refugee crisis, gradually "losing their way", sustains the author; deals like the one between Turkey and the EU (concessions on visa requirements for Turks traveling to Europe in exchange for an equivalent number of refugees taken back from Europe by Turkey) are illegal and ineffective; Muiznieks (the Council of Europe commissioner for human rights) explains that such measures are against the European Convention of the Human Rights (which prohibits the collective expulsion of aliens), against the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (the right to seek asylum, 1948) and against the United Nations Refugee Convention (seeking asylum can imply breaching immigration rules, 1951); such deals will not stop illegal migration because there are other more risky ways to reach Europe than through Turkey, sustains the author, and instead he proposes "bold measures" that "would radically shift the union's approach to migration", and these can only be long-term solutions for the short-term ones are impossible; these are: (1) uniting behind the negotiations regarding the political solutions to the conflict in Syria; (2) relocation of asylum seekers to resettlement centers in Europe (not only in Greece and Italy) along with the prohibition of inhuman and degrading treatment; (3) EU support for Greece and Macedonia for handling the immediate humanitarian emergency, including Turkey here; (4) concrete pledges like humanitarian admission programs, private sponsorship, family reunion policies, scholarships, labor mobility programs, i.e. "legal avenues for admitting Syrian refugees"; (5) coordination and sharing of responsibility among the EU states (for example,

registration centers in countries of arrival and a system of equitable distribution of asylum requests across Europe, for members and nonmembers of the EU); to make them possible, Europe needs political leadership and resources, underlines Muiznieks, and the fundament of all these are the EU moral and legal commitments.

Eventually, the most recent article provided by *The New York Times* search query is Nikos Konstandaras' "Where is the E.U.'s Moral and Political Courage?". The text starts abruptly antagonizing the despair of the migrants ("people fleeing war and poverty", starved people who only want to keep moving in their pursuit of freedom, prosperity and stability) and the cold rejectionist Europe ("the barbed wire fences of Europe's confusion and fear"); it also magnifies Greece's reaction by opposing its debt, austerity and recession to its rushing to provide shelter and care; prospects for migrants "look bleak", sustains the author, because of populist anti-migration beliefs opposed to the ideas of collective action and the principles of solidarity and humanism; the results of such clashes are "acrimony and division"; the text vividly describes the same despair and helplessness mentioned in the beginning, providing images of the arrival scenes of immigrants (empty "cavernous space", works and volunteers, rubber dinghies, "information, help and rest is free", half-eaten sandwiches, trash, bits of clothing, hot and humid air, "filled with the cries and laughs of women and children", children drawing, "choppy sea" etc.); Greece is pictured as "prompted by deep-rooted, personal empathy with people who have lost everything, who risk everything for a better life" explained by the war, dictatorship, economic hardship and mass migrations endured so far, says Konstandaras; for once, Germany and Greece seem to be "on the same side of the issue" in insisting that borders should remain open and in supporting the European humanist principles; it condemns the EU-Turkey deal, mentioned by the previous article as well, because of threatening human rights; in the conclusion, the text mentions the policy makers' confusion and the populists' exploitation of citizens' unease opposing these to the EU as still "a beacon of freedom and stability"; the solution is, underlines Konstandaras, more political and moral courage from the EU (once again, the same dichotomy), or else it will self-inflict defeat; it is all about Greece able to "try their best" inviting the union to "try harder".

### **Conclusions**

The dichotomy political – ethical encompasses the whole range of conflicting issues that the EU and its inhabitants deal with, deriving from the migration crisis. The conflict is, evidently, at the level of ideologies and the moral values implied.

Political intervention, in order to find solutions to the refugee crisis, has two actors: the European Union, on the one hand, and national governments, on the other hand; they are either both seen as guilty, i.e. unable to cope with the situation and to provide the punctual solutions to the crisis or, it is the EU that is to blame for its inability to intervene coherently and decisively and for having deprived nations of their sovereignty, thus of their power to act independently. The sharpest conclusions that some articles formulate speak about the impossibility of any feasible solutions from the EU. Less harsh opinions about the EU involvement are provided by two articles that find that the EU has the potential and resources to solve the problem generated by the refugee crisis but only in the long term and among the solutions identified there are: private and public resources, better immigration legislation, funding, schooling, volunteering, coordination and sharing of responsibilities – all contributing to the gradual naturalization of the migrants. Compared to the USA, Europe is portrayed as unable to offer the necessary immigration policies to save refugees and to solve identity and integrity problems at the same time. Moreover, not only is the EU shattered internally due to the refugee crisis but it is also split between the East and the West for reacting antagonistically. Poorer countries in the EU are either disconsidered for their lack of solidarity and insularity (the case of the Eastern European countries) or they are praised for their altruism and humanism (the case of Greece). Several articles develop arguments on the anti-EU discourses bringing into discussion the problem of national identity and sovereignty: the EU policy for open borders in seen in connection to favoring migration and thus cultural change, which, so it seems, Europe is not ready for. Moreover, the prospect of countries leaving the EU is seen as a possible solution to the crisis, which would mean 'self-inflicted' defeat for the EU.

Moral considerations are with reference to the people involved, migrants and citizens. Solidarity in helping those in need is evidently linked with human obligations and humanism and it is mostly in relation to ordinary people, 'big-hearted citizens', opposing the political elites who are seen as either arrogant and indifferent or incapable of concrete and positive action. National, ethnic and religious solidarity is associated with the lack of tolerance and consequently with

racism, radicalism and xenophobia. Migrants are also seen in connection to the terrorist threat and some articles find that such preconception is generated by ignorance and lack of accurate information; migrants are seen as refugees, people asking for asylum under unfortunate circumstances (war and poverty) only wanting to stay alive and live a decent life – an appeal for human dignity and human rights; an article even mentions the idea of 'genuine migrant' (as if there was any difference between genuine migrants and migrants as terrorists); the EU citizens who are against migrants and immigration policies in the EU are seen as those who ask for direct democracies, referendums and restatement of national identities, thus denying the idea of equality and human rights as international order; those who are 'moved' and show solidarity with the migrants/ refugees are (re)presented in opposition to politicians and political action. Ethically speaking: this migrant crisis is a humanitarian and humanist crisis.

In all these articles there is a general inducing of the idea that there is *more* to be done when it comes to the EU, its citizens and migrants, more politically and more ethically.

History is still being written. It has not come to an end for, with Francis Fukuyama, wars and revolutions have not ended: "human life then involves a curious paradox. It seems to require an injustice, for the struggle against injustice is what calls forth what is *highest* in man" (1992, p. 311). Highest or lowest?

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