# Refugees, coronavirus and the politics of representation in the Spanish press

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## Abstract

COVID-19 outbreak brought important consequences for global mobility. Border closures throughout the world meant the interruption of migratory processes, both forced and volunteer, leaving millions of people stuck on the way. This article analyses the news articles published by the Spanish newspapers *El País* and *El Mundo,* to find out if the pandemic has meant a change in the politics of representation of migration and refuge in the Spanish media during the first months of 2020. The qualitative content analysis focuses on the main sources and predominant themes in media coverage, as well as the labels applied to migrants and refugees in different contexts. The results show that changes have taken place due to the pandemic, with new nuances in the representation of migrants and refugees as victims or as a threat, but also giving space to new types of representation: migrants as necessary, and as active agents in the context of a global emergency.

## Keywords

COVID-19, migration, refuge, qualitative content analysis, Spain, news articles

## 1 Introduction

On February 14 2020, the Spanish regional newspaper *Diario Vasco* published a news article titled "Primer paso hacia una vida digna" ("First step towards a dignified life") (Rodríguez, 2020). It chronicled the arrival at the Sicilian Port of Messina of the rescue ship Aita Mari, which had rescued 158 people who had been travelling on two small boats across the Mediterranean waters. It was not unusual news. Since 2015 the Spanish media have reported, almost daily, on people who, fleeing war and devastation in Syria, Afghanistan and other countries, have started the long journey to Europe by land or sea. But the arrival of the Aita Mari was accompanied by a greater than usual police and medical deployment:

> A large police and medical contingent awaited them on the dock. Sanitarians covered from top to bottom with personal protective equipment (PPE) and masks, boarded the ship together with the Italian authorities to conduct an initial health assessment of the rescued and the crew before their disembarkation. The measures were extreme this time for fear of coronavirus contagion risk. (Rodríguez, 2020)[1]

This was the first time the words *refugee* and *coronavirus* appeared together in a news story in Spain. Since then, many more news articles have been published about refugees, coming from different nations, arriving or settled in different countries, but with something in common: the novelty, fear and helplessness that the recently appeared SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus has brought with it. Two crises – both real and politically constructed –, the health emergency and the so called "migration crisis", overlapped in 2020 with terrible consequences.

This article addresses how the terms refugee and coronavirus are being linked in the Spanish press, and the connotations and meanings that this conveys, to discover the politics of representation of refugees

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1  All original quotes in Spanish have been translated by the author.

and migrants in this new social and health context.

The politics of representation refer to the competition among groups over what is to be taken as the correct, appropriate or preferred representation (Wenden, 2005). Several social actors participate in this competition, although not all of them have the same public influence. As Bourdieu points out, symbolic power and public influence are characteristic of three relevant actors: politicians, researchers and the media. From different fields, these actors struggle to impose a legitimate vision of social reality (Bourdieu, 2005). But their discourses do not reflect the world, on the contrary, they construct it providing a framework from which to interpret all that happens in it (Hall, 1997).

In this regard, with the increasing mediatization of societies (Hjarvard, 2008), media have increased their relevance as the space where social and political issues are articulated and negotiated and struggles over hegemonic meanings take place, replacing the physical public sphere described by Habermas (2001). Today, being present in the media is proof of existence, but this presence can be constructed in different ways, as the public sphere provided by the media is also a space of struggle "over the imposition of the dominant principle of vision and division" (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 36). Discourse plays a significant role in this struggle for power, both as an instrument for the reproduction of social inequality and as a means for social change, through the construction of imaginaries that display a specific representation of reality (van Dijk, 2003).

Media discourse sinks its roots into the collective imaginary of a society, so prejudices, stereotypes and historical events guide their (re)construction of reality and feed social representations about it. Social representations are, first of all, cognitive and emotional processes that produce meaning, symbolic and dynamic realities. They also act as organising schemes for reality. Finally, social representations ensure the permanence and consistency of collective beliefs (Mannoni, 2001, p. 61). As Santamaría (2002, p. 11) suggests:

> Representations […] are a certain way of conceiving reality, in its cognitive sense but also constitutive and structuring sense. Representations are part of social relations, they are both their cause and their consequence. It is necessary to emphasize that these representations are collective not only because they are shared by the members of a group, but because they are socially elaborated, maintained and transformed within social interaction, and because, at the same time, they have the power to structure these social relationships.

Thus, social representations are at the same time socially constructed products and builders of social thought. These representations are not static but can change depending on the circumstances in a given context and the perspective of the observers. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it a new social situation, so extraordinary that it could have changed our perspective and the representations of the social world, including our understanding of global mobility (Fernández-Reino, Sumption, & Vargas-Silva, 2020). Has this new context changed the politics of representation of migration and asylum? What new imaginaries are built around migrants and refugees in the media? A qualitative content analysis of two mainstream Spanish newspapers will try to answer these questions.

Next two sections provide an overview of the media coverage of migration and refuge in Spain, as well as a summary of the consequences of the pandemic on global mobility and how it affected forced and economic migrants. Then, the methodology used in this research will be addressed, based on a compilation and qualitative content analysis of news articles published in the two leading Spanish newspapers during the first months of the pandemic (from February to May 2020). Finally, the results of this qualitative content analysis will be presented, regarding the labels, main themes and sources used in media coverage. Taking these elements into account, four types of media representation of migrants and refugees arise, as will be explained in the last section of the article.

## 2 Immigration and asylum in the Spanish media

The accession of Spain to the European Community (EC) in 1986 brought about a radical change for the country, which went from being an emitter of population – mainly to the American continent and northern Europe – to becoming a receiver of immigrants. Joining the EC also forced the formulation of the first Aliens Law,[2] the closure and surveillance of borders, and the imposition of visas to enter and stay in the country. All this led to a new reality: that of the arrival of people who, jumping over the fence or by sea on board small fishing boats (known as *cayucos* and *pateras*), tried to reach the Spanish territory. Separated by 14 km from Africa, Spain has become one of the preferred routes (the Western Mediterranean route) of sub-Saharan migrants to reach the European continent. According to International Organization for Migration (IOM)'s Flow Monitoring website,[3] 6815 people arrived in Spain by sea during the first six months of 2020, a small amount if compared to the figures of previous years, as the coronavirus pandemic interrupted mobility at a global scale.

A tightening of migration policies has been Europe's reaction to the arrival of immigrants, with measures such as the strengthening of external borders with the erection of high fences – such as those of Ceuta and Melilla in Spain –, military surveillance and sophisticated technology to detect and reject the entry of irregular migrants. But this intensification of border control has transformed the Mediterranean Sea into the biggest cemetery of the world, with thousands of deaths every year. According to IOM's Flow Monitoring website,[4] 3793 deaths were recorded in Mediterranean waters in 2015, coinciding with the massive exodus towards Europe due to the Syrian Civil War. But deaths have continued until today: In 2020, 1419 people died in the Mediterranean Sea trying to reach Europe.

Since 2015, Syrian refugees leaving from Libya have reached Europe via the Central Mediterranean route, arriving in Italy (mainly Lampedusa), whereas those departing from Turkey did so via the Eastern Mediterranean route, reaching Greece (mainly Lesbos). Consequently, Spain remained a witness to this crisis from a distance, experiencing the Syrian refugee crisis as a relatively foreign event (Seoane, 2017), more present in the media than in the Spanish territory. Psychological distancing also had to do with the national origin of most migrants and asylum seekers in Spain, mainly from Latin America. For example, in 2019 most asylum seekers came from Venezuela (40 305), Colombia (28 880), Honduras (6730), Nicaragua (5840) and El Salvador (4715) (Eurostat, 2020). Their national origin does not coincide with that of the protagonists of the "refugee crisis" in 2015, one more reason why Spain witnessed this crisis as something alien and far removed from its daily reality. Only the images of the young Aylan Kurdi, who drowned in his voyage from Turkey to Greece, seemed to awaken Spain to the harsh reality. Some Spanish local governments (Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia) offered to host refugees after that event, but disputes over refugee quotas in the European Union (EU) caused a delay in the process that resulted in very few refugees finally arriving in Spain.[5]

The Spanish press started reporting on the immigration flow to the country in the middle 1980s, parallel to the accession of Spain to the European Commission (EC) and its status as the Southern border,

2  Ley Orgánica 7/1985, de 1 de Julio, sobre Derechos y Libertades de los Extranjeros (Organic Law 7/1985 of July 1, on Rights and Freedoms of Foreigners).

3  IOM Flow Monitoring website, "Arrivals", https://migration.iom.int/europe?type=arrivals.

4  IOM Flow Monitoring website, "Dead/Missing", https://migration.iom.int/europe?type=missing.

5  In 2015, the member states of the European Union promised to relocate and resettle 160000 asylum seekers in two years, a term that expired in September 2017. By the end of 2018, the Spanish Government, which promised to host 17 337 refugees, had only received 2892 people, 16.6 % of the agreed quota (Europa Press, 2018).

combining two types of representation of migrants: as victims, or as a threat, and always as *Others* (Retis, 2006; Rodrigo-Alsina, Pineda, & García-Jiménez, 2019). Although the main ports of entry for immigrants in the territory have always been international airports or land borders, the media focused on the dramatic Mediterranean Sea crossing, with daily news on how many had reached the coasts. This reporting emphasised "they were too many people" and assumed them to be Muslims, so culturally different that they were "non-integrable" others. It thus generated social alarm, by assuming that irregular migrants arriving by sea and also by climbing over the border fences of Melilla and Ceuta were "invading" Spain (El-Madkouri, 2006, p. 110).

The discursive strategies used by the Spanish media to cover this information turned immigration into "a disturbing and worrying phenomenon" (Santamaría, 2002, p. 119). One of these media strategies consists of counting, registering and recording data and statistics on immigrants to produce the effect of truthful information. This allows the media to transmit the idea of knowledge and control of the situation, and, together with generating social alarm, legitimises the decisions and interventions developed by the political leaders (Santamaría, 2002).

A second strategy has to do with the use of language, and more specifically with the use of metaphors that contribute to the perception of immigration as a problem. By using metaphors referring to runaway nature, water or disease, and military vocabulary, immigration is presented as a great destabilising factor (Musolff, 2017). This way the media tend to associate immigrants with the social problems that cause greater concern, such as the economic crisis, unemployment, access to housing, criminality, poverty, ghetto formation, urban deterioration; in short, with the problems of social coexistence (Retis, 2006; Rodrigo-Alsina et al., 2019).

One more general practice in the Spanish media consists in providing information without delving into it. As García, Granados and Capellán (2003, p. 104) sta-te, "the cultures and countries where immigrants come from, the socio-historical circumstances that cause migration, the dependency relationships between sending and receiving countries are systematically ignored". This way, the media find an easy explanation as to why people migrate and the problems and difficult situations that migrants deal with in Spain: Immigrants and their native cultures are to blame for their difficulty in adapting to the norms, values and dominant customs, as well as for the distrust that their excessive and strange presence causes in the native population (Santamaría, 2002, p. 131). The need for the host society to actively participate in this integration process is rarely debated.

Finally, the media frequently highlight people's nationality even when it is a secondary fact, above other issues of equal or greater relevance to the understanding of the news. When the information is related to criminality, the link between nationality and crime becomes especially dangerous (Vázquez, 1999), as the media tendency to homogenising under national labels contributes to the negative stereotyping and stigmatisation of the whole community.

Compared to economic migrants, reporting on refugees and asylum seekers is slightly less negative, although this depends on their place of origin. In the context of the so-called "refugee crisis" (2015–2017), the research by Durán (2015) on media coverage of refugees arriving on the Italian island of Lampedusa reveals that those arriving from Africa were considered as a "threat" rather than as "victims". On the contrary, those arriving from Syria were referred to as "refugees" and "people", creating "a sense of identification with refugees and their struggles" (Hoyer, 2016, p. 27). In addition, the work by Seoane (2017) analysing the Spanish newspapers *El País* and *El Mundo* reveals that news reporting on the refugee crisis had refugees as the most frequently cited source in these newspapers. Also, international agencies and NGOs were cited regularly, whilst official and government sources were almost absent. In his study, both newspapers framed refugees most-

ly as victims rather than as a threat, "and wondered who was and who should be responsible for dealing with this humanitarian issue" (Seoane, 2017, p. 277).

Some years have passed since the start of the "refugee crisis", and the situation is far from improving in Syria and Afghanistan, as well as in other regions of the planet. And meanwhile, people continue to arrive at the gates of Europe, dreaming of a better life. The crowded refugee camps have multiplied, while the European governments cannot seem to agree on the quotas for migrant distribution. Furthermore, the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) has been tightened, making access to European territory even more difficult, establishing the requirement to apply for asylum in the first country that is reached, lengthening the process, and giving full recognition only to a minimal portion of all asylum applications. Along with the new fences and borders, alarming racist and hateful discourses were disseminated (see Assimakopoulos, Baider, & Millar, 2017; Musolff, 2017) once more giving rise to moral panics (Cohen, 1972), fed by the extreme-right parties across Europe.

## 3   Migration and coronavirus

At the end of December 2019, China reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) the outbreak of a new coronavirus that caused respiratory distress and pneumonia. A mandatory quarantine was decreed in Wuhan, Hubei's capital, locking down 11 million inhabitants. A month later, on January 30, the WHO declared the Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) in the face of the rapid expansion of the coronavirus, with the aim to increase coordination among all national health departments in the world. At the end of February, the WHO raised the risk of a global spread of coronavirus to "very high" and urged governments to take all necessary measures to be prepared for the arrival of the virus and, most urgently, contain its expansion. But it was impossible to put borders to the virus. Our current way of life, characterised by massive pop-

ulation movements, made it impossible. Tourism, business trips, studies abroad, migratory movements, forced displacements, all contributed to the fact that, very soon, the world shared a common, invisible and, in many cases, lethal enemy.

By May 2020 all countries in the world had imposed some sort of COVID-19-related travel restrictions (UNWTO, 2020a), causing unprecedented disruption to migrants and refugees. Border closures had serious consequences, with significant implications for human rights (IOM, 2020c). First of all, asylum seekers were denied access to safe territories where they could ask for their refugee status recognition. Many were unable to leave their countries, remaining at risk of violence, abuse, persecution and even death. Economic migrants were affected by border closures as well, being unable to depart for their planned migration journeys. Consequences were acutely felt in the economy of destination countries – where migrants were needed to carry out agricultural tasks during harvest seasons –, and the home countries – frequently highly dependent on migrants' remittances (IOM, 2020d).

Border closure also had an impact on those who were already in transit or in their destination countries, especially for the most vulnerable, who have no access to social protection and health care, and who have also faced job loss, xenophobic racism and detention risk, while being unable to return home. On the other hand, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in camps or camp-like settings were subject to cramped, poor living conditions, that ignored both physical distancing and the required hygiene measures to avoid contagion, and put them at high risk of developing other contagious diseases. Finally, border closures made it difficult for them to return to their countries of origin, resulting in large numbers of migrants being stranded around the world (Sanchez & Achilli, 2020).

But travel restriction was only one of the pandemic dramatic effects on migration and mobility systems. There are other immediate effects and also those that will affect migrants, refugees and asylum seek-

ers worldwide in the intermediate and long term.[6] As usual, the most vulnerable have been those most affected by COVID-19, including migrants and refugees in different settings. Even though some countries – Italy and Portugal – started regularisation programmes for irregular migrants, so they could access social protections (such as health services or food and shelter support), they were temporary and only for migrants working in specific sectors (basically, agricultural and domestic workers) (Vargas, 2020).

Legal or irregular migrants have been on the frontline: health care workers, senior care and childcare workers, domestic workers, transportation workers, seasonal agricultural workers, etc. These jobs have been called 3D jobs: dirty, dangerous and demeaning. But COVID-19 pandemic proved they are also essential. This reveals that migrants play a key role in destination countries' societies, although their legal status and discriminatory practices keep them in a very vulnerable position (IOM, 2020a). The pandemic has also brought about racism and discrimination against migrants. Not only Chinese people but every migrant has been blamed as responsible for the coronavirus spread.

Finally, COVID-19 may have been used to further "securitise" migration and asylum seeking. National governments seem to focus on border control and security, purportedly to prevent coronavirus spread, but restrictions imposed today may become permanent for migrants and asylum seekers. However, the pandemic has also drawn attention to the fact that migrants are vital to many sectors in developed countries, and some countries have granted flexibility on immigration processes (IOM, 2020b). So, although it is still early to draw conclusions, we could be witnessing a change in European immigration policies.

## 4    Methodology

To find out changes and continuities in the politics of representation of migration and refuge, a qualitative content analysis was performed. The sample of news was selected through the daily press compilation carried out by the Observatory for Media Diversity (Observatorio de la Diversidad en los Medios, ODM, for its initials in Spanish).[7] The ODM database was searched by entering the words *refugee (refugiado)* and *coronavirus* in the search engine. These two keywords were selected from among others after careful consideration. In the Spanish media the words *refugee (refugiado)* or *asylum seeker (demandante de asilo)* are less frequently used than *immigrant (inmigrante)* or *migrant (migrante)* (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore, 2015), and point to a specific type of migration. As the term *refugee* tends to co-occur with *migrant* and *immigrant* in media coverage, it was selected to include news articles which took into account all types of migration, both forced and volunteer. In a similar vein, *coronavirus* is preferred by the Spanish media, over others such as *SARS-CoV-2* or *COVID-19*, and for this reason was chosen as the second keyword.

The date of the first published news article was taken as the starting point (February 14 2020) to demarcate a period of one hundred days for the search (May 24 2020). This period was chosen because it was a time when misinformation about the disease caused by the coronavirus, its modes of transmission and the symptoms with which it occurred, prevailed around the world. In this context, political and media discourses could significantly influence public opinion.

The search yielded a result of 263 news items published in 17 different newspapers. After reviewing the headlines, 9 repeated news items were removed, resulting in 254 news stories being finally collected.

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6    See IOM COVID-19 Analytical Snapshots, available at https://www.iom.int/es/migra-tion-research/covid-19-analytical-snapshot.

7    The ODM database is available to researchers, journalists, NGOs, and general public interested in the media representation of issues related to ethnic and cultural diversity. It can be consulted at http://medios.mu-gak.eu/.

This article focuses on the news articles published by the online version of *El País* and *El Mundo*, the two most widely read newspapers in Spain, with 1 004 000 and 657 000 readers respectively (AIMC, 2020). These media have a different ideological stance, *El País* being a left-wing newspaper, and *El Mundo* presenting a right-wing ideological position.

During the period considered, *El País* published 22 news articles that included the selected keywords, while *El Mundo* published 8 news articles. The news articles compiled were systematised in a database for better treatment, and were analysed in order to determine the politics of representation of refuge and migration during the pandemic. Some questions guided the analysis: How are migrants and refugees represented in the Spanish print media in times of the pandemic? Which words and semantic fields are used to report about them? Do they have a voice? Who are the key sources? What are the main themes covered? All these questions are relevant to understand the ideologies that underlie media discourses.

## 5    Labels, main themes and sources in media coverage

Immigration and asylum are amongst the topics that generate the most social debate, with mixed positions regarding the benefits or problems they can create, and the rights or duties that should be granted to those who leave their homes and countries to settle amongst us. Furthermore, it is, of course, a political issue, often used by political parties of all sides to gather support (votes) and to attack or question their opponents. The way in which migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are represented in the media therefore becomes extremely important. One element to be considered is the use of words or labels used by the media to name people on the move. Sajjad (2018) examined the complex world of labels deployed for migrants, and concluded that they contribute to their identification as social, cultural, and medical "threats", "victims" and, increasingly,

a "security problem". This polarised representation leads to the affective mobilisation of the public in two opposite directions: fear and compassion (Rizo, 2011), but not to a calm, well-founded, comprehensive understanding of the causes and consequences of global mobility, and how it responds to the colonial and imperial European history and the intrinsic demands of the capitalist socioeconomic model.

The conducted qualitative content analysis shows *El País* and *El Mundo* use the words *migrant / immigrant* and *refugee / asylum seeker* in different ways depending on the geographical context. While reports about the Rohingyas in Asia or refugee camps on the Greek frontier use the word *refugee*, this term is rarely used when referring to the Spanish context. For example, one of the articles described people on the Greek frontier as "refugees", whilst those arriving via the Central and Western Mediterranean routes were defined as *"irregular immigrants"* (Abellán, 2020).[8] When information concerns the national context, the two newspapers use the labels *immigrant* and *refugee* together, making no attempt to specify what each term refers to. But the use of words matters. As Sajjad (2018, p. 41) states, whilst some labels "offer a degree of protection against refoulement, many more individuals do not get full protection as a consequence of how they are labelled".

A second element that has an important influence on media representation of migration and refuge is the main topic of the news. A careful analysis of the selected news items helped to identify four main themes in media coverage: 1) border control and security (37 %); 2) conditions and management of refugee camps in different countries (30 %); 3) the experience of migrants and refugees during the pandemic (20 %); and 4) the need for migrant labour in Europe and Spain (6 %). Of course, these are big comprehensive themes, that in-

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8    All emphasised words in this article are the author's work. These words have been italicised to highlight their positive or negative connotations.

clude many other related topics, and that can appear together in the news articles.

The third element that strongly influences the representation of migrants and refugees is sourcing routine, as depending on the sources' interests and social position they offer different perspectives of social reality. News analysed used NGOs (cited in 40 % of news items), refugees (30 %) and politicians (13 %), as their main sources.

From the interrelation between the main theme addressed and the sources used, different perspectives emerged. News using political sources addressed three main topics: border control and security, the need of migrant workforce, and the management of the refugee camps in Greece. From different perspectives, the three topics coincide in interpreting migration (whether forced or voluntary) as a problem to be solved. Regarding border control and security, Valero (2020) reports that the leaders of Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia met to address the migration crisis on the Greek frontier. For these political leaders, the solution was "to *strengthen* the EU's external borders and to *fight* against *human traffickers* who will take advantage of the current situation to *flood* Europe" (Valero, 2020). The reference to traffickers, flooding water, and the use of the verb *to fight*, contribute to transmit the idea of a highly dangerous and uncontrollable situation at the European borders, which requires decisive action to repel offenders. Politicians point at human trafficking as a problem to be urgently addressed (Espinosa, 2020; Moltó, 2020; Ponce, 2020; Valero, 2020). At no time is human trafficking attributed to the growing obstacles that Europe is putting to the legal arrival of immigrants and asylum seekers, the main reason why they resort to traffickers.

A second topic addressed by political sources is related to migrant workforce supply. In a context of border closures due to the pandemic, seasonal workers cannot reach the European countries where they are needed. Faced with the urgent need for agricultural labourers, even the German far-right party calls for these workers to be admitted, although they must be "*European* workers" and "migrants, not asylum seekers" (Carbajosa, 2020). This news article also cited the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen: "We need the people who plant and harvest our crops. We have to make sure we have enough *temporary* workers in agriculture". Although this news seems to transmit something positive (immigrants are necessary and wanted), the words used point to the other direction: entry must be "controlled", "temporary", and only for "non asylum-seekers".

A third theme has to do with refugee camps management. In a news item the Greek government spokesman affirms that the refugee camps in Greece are *"anarchic"* and a "*bomb* for public health", and that is why they want to build *"closed controlled centres"*, with capacity for 20 000 people (*El País*, 2020). He states that "closed premises are *safer* and *limit health risks"*, "problems [related to coronavirus] can be *effectively* treated", and this plan "*benefits* local communities", since these facilities would be "away from the urban centre, so that economic and social activity can regain *normality"*. Despite the positive connotations of the words chosen for his statements, some conclusions can be drawn from this plan: a desire to strengthen control over the refugee camps by using closed buildings, where access can be monitored; and a desire to hide refugees and keep them out of sight and daily interaction with the inhabitants of the islands (needless to say how this looks like a prison).

News in which political representatives are the main source of information, clearly contrast with those which cover the topic from the NGOs' and refugees' perspective. These news articles present humanitarian themes and report on refuge as a human drama, an experience that increases the vulnerability of those who have been forced to leave their homes to save their lives.

Regarding the sources coming from NGOs and civil society, international organisations such as Doctors Without Borders, Save the Children or the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), are

mostly cited in the news referring to the refugee camps in Greece, whilst national NGOs prevail when dealing with the Spanish context. Their discourses focus on two main topics. Firstly, the programmes and activities they develop – now interrupted by the pandemic –, related to the bad condition of the refugee camps. In this regard, sources highlight the dramatic situation in the overcrowded refugee camps, with few cleaning and hygiene measures, and lack of healthcare. Under these circumstances, the arrival of the coronavirus can be a disaster (de la Cal, 2020).

The second main theme addressed by sources from NGOs focuses on border control, but from a different perspective than that of political sources: European migration and asylum policies are strongly disapproved. National and international NGOs claim their work is more necessary than ever, and criticise the criminalisation of solidarity, that is, accusing those organisations which rescue people in the Mediterranean of human trafficking, one more EU strategy to make it difficult for people to reach European territory (Moltó, 2020). NGOs also report that different countries are not complying with the 1951 Geneva Convention, by not allowing asylum seekers to enter their territory (Bonet, 2020; Ponce, 2020). And of course, confinement in camps is criticised:

> NGOs have long been *warning* of the *impossibility* of reproducing in Moria the recommendations that are given to the general population. Doctors Without Borders, among others, has called for asylum seekers to be *evacuated* to places where they can *protect* themselves. *"Forcing* people to live in *overcrowded* and *unsanitary* camps as part of European containment policies was always *irresponsible*, but now, due to Covid-19, it is more so than ever," says Apostolos Veizis, chief of the NGO medical service in Greece. (Otero, 2020)

Finally, refugee sources explain first-hand their experience during the pandemic, in relation to three main themes: life in the refugee camps, their work in essential sectors in Spain, and the need for social and legal recognition. Regarding the refugee camps, these sources provide a perspective from within. They witnessed how they were completely fenced by police, and how volunteers were forced to leave due to an alleged fear of the spread of coronavirus. Refugees were also prohibited from approaching the neighbouring towns, where they often went to top up their mobile phones and to buy food (Mourenza, 2020).

Confined and without the NGOs' help, refugees started developing their own initiatives: clothes and mask manufacturing workshops, cleaning, and awareness tasks to inform about the measures imposed on public spaces. In Moria, the lack of a good communication infrastructure motivated the creation of volunteer refugee groups to inform about the pandemic, the Moria Coronavirus Awareness Team (MCAT).

> For more than two weeks, volunteers have been creating social media content and posters in multiple languages and announcing recommendations with megaphones. "Many are not aware of the reality of the virus, so we explain what it is, tell them they shouldn't shake hands, that they should avoid crowded places and try to stay inside the tents", Mohammad explains. (Otero, 2020)

Different news articles reflect this active engagement of refugees. This type of news content is summarised in the words of one of the refugees who is part of the MCAT: "Refugees are *capable* of doing things for *themselves"* (Otero, 2020).

Also in Spain, migrant and refugee voices explain their experience during the pandemic, highlighting their actions to collaborate with the manufacturing of masks and protective suits, helping with the food bank and supporting regularisation advocacy activities through the *#RegularizaciónYa* campaign (*#*Regularisation Now) (Jáuregui, 2020). This campaign asks for the regularisation of all irregular immigrants, to promote their social and health protection during the pandemic. The actions carried out demonstrate a firm commitment to the host country, regardless of migrants' legal situation. They want to be full citizens, with rights and duties. Their actions and discourses combine the pride

and satisfaction of contributing to fight against the global pandemic, with the fear and helplessness generated by their irregular situation. Campaign spokespeople remind that they are essential workers, in the agricultural sector but also in other services such as cleaning, transport, or the care sector, yet they remain totally unprotected while the virus has increased their vulnerability.

> We have been *left behind* despite being in the *front line*, we are the *essential* ones, caregivers, some were *fired* and others went this monday to clean up without any *prevention* protocol for them" says Edith Espinola, spokesperson of the *#RegularizaciónYa* campaign. (Jáuregui, 2020)

## 6    The politics of representation in times of a pandemic

The qualitative content analysis reveals four types of media representations of migration and refuge. Two of them are reasonably usual: the immigrant as a threat or as a victim (Martínez Lirola, 2013; Retis, 2006; Rodrigo-Alsina et al., 2019), although COVID-19 introduced nuances to these types of representations. The other two are quite new: the immigrant as necessary and the immigrant as an active agent. The predominant representation depends on the newspaper analysed, as their ideological stance may influence their discourses and main themes addressed.

### 6.1  Migrants as victims

The portrayal of migrants and refugees as victims and vulnerable people is the most common in the media analysed. This representation derives from their experience with dictatorships, armed conflicts,

natural disasters, human traffickers and discrimination. Now, new causes for victimisation arise: mobility restrictions and racism derived from the COVID-19 pandemic. News highlighted that border closures increased their vulnerability, whether they are living in very poor conditions in refugee camps or are stranded in transit or destination countries without an income, social protection or health assistance (Ponce, 2020).

Health emergency has also given wings to racism and xenophobia, as reported by news referred both to refugees in Greece, Malaysia, Kenya or South Africa, and the Spanish context. The fact that the virus was discovered in China made Chinese migrants in Spain experience verbal aggression and rejection, but they have not been the only ones. The economic crisis that has accompanied "the new normal" led to the rejection of immigrants and refugees, perceived not only as competitors in an already damaged labour market but also consumers of an increasingly decimated welfare state (Martínez Lirola, 2013).

This economic and sanitary situation encouraged xenophobic discourses articulated by the right and far-right political leaders. To give an example, Almoguera (2020) reports the refusal of a mayor from the People's Party to admit refugees in a hotel in his local area, whilst the far-right party VOX did not miss this occasion to criticise the leftist Spanish government affirming it "accommodates *irregular* immigrants in *luxury* hotels" and "provides masks, hand sanitiser gel and other protective material to immigrants". This statement is an example of the "Spanish First" ideology, which contributes to an anti-immigration stance and reinforces discrimination.

Table 1:    Predominant types of media representation (N = 30)

| Newspaper | As victims and vulnerable people | As a threat or a problem to be solved | As necessary | As active people |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *El Mundo* | 7 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| *El País* | 8 | 5 | 6 | 3 |
| in % | 50 | 20 | 20 | 10 |

## 6.2  Migrants as a threat

The representation of migrants as a threat is common worldwide (Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013; Parker, 2015; van Gorp, 2005). They can be presented as a threat to national security, a cultural threat or a threat to community cohesion, a threat to welfare and health systems, and even as a public threat by linking refugees and migrants to crime (Berry et al., 2015).

It is remarkable that during the pandemic migrants and refugees have not been portrayed mainly as sick people affected by a life-threatening virus, but as potential coronavirus transmitters, that is, as a threat to public health. For example, on the US-Mexican border, the fear of deportees spreads:

> *Deportees* from the United States also include hundreds of Central Americans who have to cross all of Mexico to reach their home countries. These days they are not only migrants, but they are also *"potential viruses" in transit.* (Morán, 2020)

In Asia, Ponce (2020) reports about the drama of the Rohingya, fleeing their country (Myanmar) to find only closed borders in the countries around the area, as the coronavirus crisis offers an excuse to do so:

> The [Malaysian] government justifies it as an anti-coronavirus measure by suggesting that refugees could be *carriers.* This response has only served to further *stigmatise* refugees by drawing them as a *threat* to the country. (Ponce, 2020)

The closure of refugee camps is also related to this idea of seeing refugees as the transmitters of the virus, despite being the volunteers and external staff who usually brought the virus into the camp. In Spain, the coordinator of a Red Cross refugee centre where seven cases of COVID-19 had appeared, clarified that, "against those who spread 'the idea of the *black* coming to *infect* us', it was external staff who transmitted the virus to internees" (Almoguera, 2020).

Fear of contagion has been used to further securitise migration, even if measures adopted are not internationally approved.

For example, Mourenza (2020) reports that Greece stopped applying the 1951 Geneva Convention, using tear gas and firearms to deter asylum seekers in the frontier, and causing the death of two asylum seekers.

## 6.3  Migrants as necessary: The essential workers

The coronavirus pandemic has brought with it a new representation: the migrant as an essential worker. It does not mean they have not been necessary all the time, but the closure of frontiers and the forced confinement brought the issue to the front page and stated it plainly: Our economies depend directly on the immigrant workforce, so the frontiers should be open for those who have to work in agricultural, care and other essential sectors. Of course, this utilitarian discourse has nuances, and some migrants are preferred to others: "*temporary* workers", "*EU* migrants", but "not asylum seekers*"* (Carbajosa, 2020).

Six news articles, all of them published by the left-wing newspaper *El País*, represented migrants as necessary for the Spanish economy. Their work in essential sectors kept them exposed to make everything work, while others stayed at home. Sadly, these essential workers are the most precarious and vulnerable. In this context, *El País* is open to recognising the contributions of migrants to the Spanish society and economy:

> These people support our pension system and our labour market, in *essential* sectors such as care or distribution and supermarkets, so *important* in this time of health emergency. […] sectors that experience great job *insecurity* and less *social protection.* (Ares, 2020)

By recognising this fundamental contribution, the newspaper is pressing for a change in the migration model. The pandemic, as a crisis, is also "an *opportunity* for a radical change of model to achieve a *regular* and *orderly* migration system in which contribution of migrants to essential sectors is *recognised*" (Fanjul, 2020). The change must include the regularisation of irregular migrants, who are in this situation because of the obstacles to legal

entry and residence imposed by Europe, which far from dissuading potential migrants generates dramatic situations in the frontier and feeds human smuggling.

The representation of migrants as essential workers has different nuances depending on the sources used by the media. Political sources maintain a utilitarian and self-interested stance on immigration, as something we can temporarily benefit from, whenever we want, without offering anything in return (Carbajosa, 2020). The rejection of the arrival of people who stay, who have rights as well as duties, is clearly observed, and instead, the use of temporary workers who leave when no longer needed – with nothing to claim, no rights to demand – is advocated. Despite needing them, the border still stands.

To the contrary, civil society, NGOs and migrant and refugee sources demand recognition of the cultural and economic contributions of migrants to society, and the necessity to make changes in the European and Spanish migration policy to ensure social protection and health care provision for all (Fanjul, 2020; Jáuregui, 2020).

### 6.4 Migrants as active agents

The sample of news examined shows a fourth type of representation of migrants and refugees: as active agents both in the prevention of COVID-19 and claiming citizenship rights. This type of representation is not common in the mainstream media – which tends to represent them as passive, vulnerable, needy victims –, although it is the dominant pattern in the ethnic minority media developed in Spain (Echevarría, Ferrández-Ferrer, & Dallemagne, 2015; Ferrández-Ferrer, 2019).

With the closure of the refugee camps, asylum application procedures being interrupted and the departure of NGO workers, it seems that life has stopped for the refugees. Social interaction is paralysed, with thousands of people crammed into tents or small shacks built by them. Moreover, all educational programmes, health related workshops and labour activities developed by the NGOs have been interrupted until further notice. In this dramatic scenario, the media begin to portray a new type of refugee: the active, motivated, decisive, organised refugee, who collaborates to protect the entire camp from the threat of the virus. They do not present themselves as passive victims, or recipients of NGO support, but as active and motivated agents involved in a common task (Alhejazi, 2020; Otero, 2020).

Also in the Spanish context, migrants and refugees appear as active agents against the coronavirus, motivated people working together to improve their lives and the rest of society, becoming essential during this time of confinement, and deserving social and legal recognition (Esbert-Pérez, 2020; Jáuregui, 2020). Reporting on the *#RegularizaciónYa* campaign and the rest of initiatives developed by them in Spain and in the refugee camps, migrants are portrayed in a positive way: they take initiative, they can do things by themselves, they are intelligent. They are like *us*.

Also by giving them the opportunity to speak by themselves – to be subjects and not mere objects of mediated discourses –, the media analysed are recognising them as legitimate interlocutors. This representation of refugees as active agents in mainstream media could be a step towards more favourable representations, more accessible to the wider audience than those present in the ethnic media.

### 7　Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, two important questions were introduced: Have the politics of representation of migration and asylum changed during the pandemic? What new imaginaries are built around migrants and refugees in the media? A qualitative content analysis of news published by *El País* and *El Mundo* during a period of one hundred days shows continuities and also changes. The representation of migrants and refugees as victims or as a threat continues till today but takes on new forms due to the coronavirus. The pandemic has served as an argument against immigrants, accusing them of its spread, although migratory movements

worldwide are reduced if compared to international mobility due to tourism, leisure and business (Lacomba, 2020).[9] But whilst many efforts have been done to reactivate international tourism and business, migration is still labelled as a threat.

However, COVID-19 also brought changes. The representation of migrants as essential for European economies is one of them. During the period analysed, the right-wing newspaper *El Mundo* did not publish news items offering this type of representation although, after many months of pandemic, this imaginary is nowadays present in all media outlets (Matarín, 2020). Clearly, recognising the contribution of migrants to society is positive, but this discourse seems to be too focused on the economy, forgetting social and cultural contributions, and resulting too utilitarian (Kancs & Lecca, 2018). Moreover, political discourse on this issue seems to remain firm in its position of making Europe a fortress. Borders have been reinforced, and for those already in European territory no long-term integration is offered, no regularisation programmes are debated, no citizen rights are guaranteed after the pandemic.

Refugee and migrant sources offered a different perspective of reality. A recent study showed how media voicing strategies can produce silencing and "misrecognition of refugees as political, social and historical actors, thereby keeping them firmly outside the remit of 'our' communities of belonging" (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017, p. 629). However, these sources have been necessary to introduce changes in the media dominant representations. Thousands of kilometres away, in the refugee camps in Greece or Jordan, migrants and refugees acquire a new consideration: They are portrayed as active, motivated, organised people, who have a voice, and who can do things for themselves. Accustomed to seeing the refugees through the eyes of others (Smets & Bozdağ, 2018), this type of representation is a novelty. Refugees have agency. Although the limitations imposed by the coronavirus affect them severely in the refugee camps, these initiatives empower them against the disease and also against those who only see them as passive and needy victims, recipients of international aid.

In Spain, the awareness of being necessary encouraged migrants to start a campaign to ask for their regularisation, and thus achieve the social and legal protection they need. This is not the first time that they ask for the extension of citizen rights (Suárez, Macià, & Moreno, 2007). But perhaps this time their demand will be heard, considering the important role they are playing during the pandemic. The newspaper *El País* seems to support a change in the immigration policy of the Spanish government. Maybe Spanish society will support it as well in the short term, given the media potential to influence public opinion and policy.

Time has passed since the first news article which included the words *refugee* and *coronavirus* was published in Spain. Although it is too early to draw conclusions, the pandemic may produce changes in our understanding of migration processes. The new politics of representation of migrants and refugees seem to point in that direction. But an important question remains: To what extent can such representations oppose or challenge the dominant politics of representation of refugees and migrants as victims or as a threat? Positive and negative representations will probably coexist in the media for a long time – or at least for the duration of the pandemic. The outcome of the health and economic crisis could tip the balance one way or the other, influencing public opinion accordingly. Future research, including a larger number of newspapers and a longitudinal perspective, could contribute to clarify in which direction the changes are pointing.

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9 In 2019, the number of international migrants was 272 million (IOM, 2019), while 1.5 billion international tourist arrivals were recorded globally (UNWTO, 2020b).

## Conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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