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The Making of a Crisis. Migration and Polarisation in the French Press

Michelle Reddy¹ and H el ene Thiollet²

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Abstract

Mass inflows of immigrants are believed to create moral panic which impacts attitudes and votes. However, few scholars systematically explore the discursive construction of migration as a crisis in relation to actual migration flows. When and how does migration become a crisis? To answer this question, we draw on mixed methods harnessing automated text analysis, linear regression, as well as qualitative analysis, to analyse “migration crisis” discourses in a corpus extracted from French newspapers between 2008 and 2020. We locate the emergence of ‘migration crisis’ discourses in the summer of 2015, absent massive inflows of migrants or refugees in France contrary to other European countries. We show that conservative newspapers overwhelmingly contribute to framing the crisis as one of “migration or migrant” rather than one of asylum or refugees despite the humanitarian nature of inflows. Furthermore, conservative newspapers do not only mention the migration crisis more than liberal ones, but they also create a sense of slow-burning or creeping migration crisis, as an undercurrent in media topics. Our fine-grained analysis of the case of the migration crisis in the French media offers theoretical and methodological inputs for an empirically grounded and constructivist theory of political crises.

Keywords

migration crisis, political polarisation, media, constructivism, France

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Introduction

Depictions of masses attempting to cross barbed wire fences in Poland in 2021, in the Balkans and the Spanish enclave of Ceuta and Melilla in 2015 and 2016, as well as photographs of boats filled with people in the Mediterranean paint the “narrative of crisis associated with the movement of people to Europe” (Collyer and King 2016: 2). The idea that Europe and more generally, the world, is experiencing a “migration crisis” pervades media discourses. Such moral panics happen “without much discernment” about the types and volume of migration actually taking place, as John Agnew (2019) noted in the case of the US in 2018. Common representations of immigration flows are important as they are believed to shape attitudes and votes. However, few scholars have systematically explored the discursive construction of migration as a crisis in relation to actual migration flows. When and how does migration become a crisis?

To answer this question, this article anatomizes the emergence and mainstreaming of “migration crisis” discourse in the French media in the 2010s. To do so we use a novel textual dataset composed of around 12000 articles mentioning either a migration or refugee crisis extracted from six main French national newspapers. While the correlation between migration flows and media frenzy often goes unquestioned, media attention for migration is not necessarily triggered by large inflows of foreigners. In 2015, asylum applications skyrocketed in Europe to approximately 1.3 million in 2015 and remained high in 2016 but dropped by nearly half in 2017. Most of the applications were located in Germany, Austria, and Sweden (Eurostat, 2019). We focus on the case of France between 2009 and 2020 where crisis discourses emerged in the press *absent* large and rapid inflows of immigrants across French borders which would qualify as “critical” or “crisis” in 2015. The contrast between empirical realities of cross border movements across time and the discursive framing showcases the role of media in the social construction of public representations. In comparison, Perron (2022) showed that crisis discourses were absent in Germany as the largest numbers of Syrian refugees were arriving in the country. In this context, the relationship between media discourse and migration or asylum flows in this study becomes part of a general puzzle: how does the media shape realities and frame events? Answering this question leads us to investigate to what extent the media, and particularly conservative newspapers, convincingly construe migration or asylum related news *as* crisis. Media constructions of migration as a crisis may thus contribute to “moral panic” described as false or exaggerated perception of certain social issues fuelled by media coverage (Cohen 2011 [1972]), potentially triggering disproportionate reactions to these coverage (Thompson 1990). Beyond migration, our research contributes to an empirically grounded theory of political crises. While crises are generally considered social constructs (Hay 2016), there is limited work focusing on the discursive phenomenology of their emergence, transformation over time, the link between crisis discourses and empirical manifestations and the role of political polarisation. Our fine-grained analysis of the polarisation of the migration crisis in the French media thus offers theoretical and methodological inputs for an empirically grounded and constructivist theory of crises.

With this theoretical ambition in mind, we address three empirical questions: How do crisis discourses relate to migration and asylum flows? When and How does the migration crisis emerge in the news? Do conservative and liberal newspapers frame the crisis differently? Combining qualitative methods with automated text analysis and quantitative methods, we identify inductively the mechanisms at work in the making of the “migration crisis”: *event-making*, *mainstreaming*, and *polarisation*. We confirm the importance of media slant in discursive processes behind the emergence and mainstreaming of the “migration crisis”. Media coverage dominated by conservative newspapers thus not only frames the migration crisis in

intense media cycles around specific political events linked to inflows of immigrants or asylum seekers or crisis management, but also creates a sense of rampant crisis through references to the migration crisis as background noise in articles dealing with other topics.

We also make several methodological contributions to the use of mixed methods in text analysis in political science. First, we compare text subsets, rather than using one corpus, which enables us to better understand the textual mechanisms behind media polarisation. Second, we draw on mixed methods and notably qualitative research to analyse our findings to overcome the limitations in interpretability of results from text-as-data approaches. More generally, we contribute to a broader constructivist research agenda on crises of the economy, environment, health or migration. Our results notably show that crises are not just events or processes observed empirically but rather constructed as self-referential systems of meanings which are strongly politicised.

This article unfolds as follows. We first introduce our contributions in a constructivist framework of analysis, our hypotheses, our corpus and methodology. We then present our results in four parts. The first part focuses on the emergence of “migration crisis” as a trope of media discourse in 2015 absent massive and rapid (irregular) immigration inflows or rise in asylum claims in France contrary to many other European countries. Secondly, we analyse the use of “migration or migrant” rather than one of “refugee or asylum” to characterise the “crisis.” Thirdly, we unpack the political polarisation of press coverage with conservative newspapers driving both the quantitative and qualitative framing of migration as crisis. Fourthly, we find that the French press, particularly in conservative newspapers, both sensationalise specific events as critical and at the same time create a sense of “creeping crisis” around migration issues that permeates media discourses. Going beyond France and migration issues, we conclude that our findings bring in theoretical and methodological innovation and open avenues for comparative research on the politics of crises.

Our contributions

Unpacking the discursive roots of (mis) representations of Migration in the Media

Research across EU countries shows temporal variation in the salience of migration issues (Brug et al. 2015; Grande, Schwarzbozl, and Fatke 2018). Social science research - from anthropology, to media studies to political science and economics - as well as surveys and studies led by civil society organisations³ have emphasised the importance of misperceptions in public representations of immigrants and of immigration. Misperceptions of migration are strikingly widespread across countries and bear consequences on voters’ preferences making them averse to redistribution in general (Alesina, Miano, and Stantcheva 2018). Recent studies on immigration to the US highlight that policies and discourses on irregular migration are “fact-free” and “transforming what is essentially a humanitarian problem into an immigration crisis” (Durand & Massey, D. S. 2019). Importantly, research shows that views on immigration are linked to the perceived quality of migrants (where do they come from, their level of education etc.) (Alesina, Murard, & Rapoport 2021) and notably the perceived threat of specific migrants’ groups (Quilian 1995). And they also respond to misrepresentations of the size of migration

³ See for instance the International Catholic Commission on Migration project on “How to Counter the Misrepresentation of Migrants and Refugees” based on studies on the impact of media discourses on migrants during the 2015 crisis across Europe. Source: <https://www.icmc.net/2019/07/30/how-to-counter-the-misrepresentation-of-migrants-and-refugees/>

(or asylum) flows rather than immigrants and their characteristics (Gorodzeisky & Semyonov 2020).⁴

Yet more research is needed on the making of such (mis)representations. Understanding how newspapers - among other actors like social media - frame migration “as crisis” offers crucial grounds to understand the emergence and consolidation of perceptions and misperceptions which in turn impact political preferences and policy making. It is crucial to investigate the discursive roots of these misrepresentations: how do public discourses present numbers of migrants and how are migrant inflows characterised. In our work, we consider that the initial characterisation as either “migrant” or “refugee” is crucial since the previous studies have shown that opinions across the world and in Europe differ. While there is overall public support for asylum seekers, views on immigration have become increasingly negative.

Attention to media discourse in political sciences is often driven by questions around the impact of the media on public opinion and policy agenda (see, for example, Blinder, 2015; Miller and Krosnick, 2000; Dekker and Scholten, 2017). Although not examined here, the downstream consequences of media discourses are important as media discourses are crafted in broader contexts of partisan discourses and public opinions in the past decades. While the anti-immigration rhetoric is nothing new (Noiriel 2014; Imbert 2022), pushback against migration and international institutions such as the European Union (EU), and manifestations of liberalism, have accelerated particularly since the 2008 global financial crisis. Negative attitudes toward migrants and even refugees are often said to increase (Hatton 2011), particularly among conservative Europeans and those distrustful of the EU (Czymara, 2021; Claassen & McLaren 2021). Yet, some studies find a relative stability in public attitudes towards migration in France (Dennison and Talò, 2017) and contest the ideas of a “rising tide” of anti-immigration parties in Western Europe (Dennison and Geddes 2019).

Our contribution focuses on the use of “migration crisis” discourse as episodically or consistently constructing migration as a crisis generates long-lasting and pervasive moral panic. Using the term “moral panic” does not simply imply that something does not exist and is the product of illusion of ignorance that can be redressed by valid sources (Cohen, 1972, p. vii). Moral panics reflect specific social mechanisms of distortion and polarisation embedded in discourses and practices. They maybe “good” or “bad” based on their relation to confirmed social facts (serving as a warning mechanism for mobilisation in the case of climate change for instance) but they are always politically instrumentalised (Cohen 2011 [1972]). In the case of migration crises, the moral panic around foreigners' arrival may be driven by fear of irregular migration triggering xenophobic attitudes. On the other hand, compassion for refugees as a *positive* panic preparing destination countries and public opinions for welcoming asylum policies. Yet this remains to be investigated through further studies on impacts of crisis discourses on public opinions and policy making.

Confirming Media Slant and Polarisation on Migration

Scholars usually assume that migration is *polarising* the news and through the way it is framed in journalistic contents (Talabanova and Balch, 2010; Madrigal and Soroka, 2021). Migration is often used as one of the most polarising issues in experimental social sciences (Becker, Porter, and Centola 2019). Our research actually takes the reverse perspective: it investigates media slant defined as ideological preferences acknowledged in the press

⁴ Scholars disagree on whether misperceptions may be redeemed by better information. Alesina et al (2018) conclude from an experiment that even with better information on immigration and immigrants, aversion for redistribution persists. Conversely, Grigorieff et al (2018) find in the context of the EU migration crisis that when individuals receive information about the true share of migrants, they are less likely to perceive a surplus of migrants.

(Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010) which can be driven by economic or other factors. We test whether or not such media slant impacts the framing of flows of immigrants and asylum seekers as “crisis” in the French context. While there is significant evidence of ideological selectivity and political polarisation in the United States (see, for example, Iyengar et al., 2019), studies on Europe have mixed results.⁵ Regarding migration specifically, Berry et al. (2015) found convergence on asylum and migration frames within countries, regardless of newspaper political inclination. At the same time a European Parliament (2019) study found that the newspaper's political inclination influences certain issues, such as immigration. In this study, we confirm the existence of a minor media slant and document the discursive workings of media polarisation through its impact on the labelling and framing of the crisis as either a migrant or a refugee crisis. Building upon our findings, future work may investigate the extent to which media discourses in turn polarise attitudes and votes.

Contributing to a Constructivist Theory of Crisis

Myron Weiner (1995) theorised that politics matter more than migration in the construction of migration crises. Defining the “global migration crisis,” Weiner (1995) analysed the transformation of migration into a major security issue in the eighties and nineties, noting that a migration crisis is both a matter of data (i.e. numbers of immigrants) and a consequence of how these numbers are socially assembled, interpreted and represented. Consequently, Weiner (1995)’s observations resonate with the work of constructivist scholars who engaged critically with the 2008-9 financial crisis (Roitman 2014), with the multifarious environmental crisis (Latour 2018) or with localised or diffuse health crises such as Ebola (Reddy 2022) or HIV (Guillén and Perrow, 1990) and COVID-19 (Boin, Ekengren, and Rhinard 2020), as well as with migration crises (Menjívar, Ruiz, and Ness 2019; Calabrese, Gaboriaux, and Véniard 2022). Constructivist scholars insist upon the construction of crisis “as a protracted historical and experiential condition” (Roitman 2018) and a process of political transformation both in domestic contexts and for international institutions (Hay 1999; Jessop 2015). As such, these studies depart from policy-oriented research that focuses on crisis management or preparedness. In this line of work, our contribution lies in unpacking the discursive grounds upon which ‘crisis’ narratives emerge and have come to pervade public perceptions and policy domains (Aguiton, Cabane & Cornilleau 2019; Gilbert 2019).

Our article brings a novel attention to the thick temporality of the migration crisis. Political analysis of crises often tends to focus on fast-burning crises as events or sequences of events with long-term consequences, like the Cuban missile crisis or 9/11. Recent research on “creeping” crises, about migration, climate change, and pandemics, reflect a “gradual emergence and development of a [socially perceived] threat to core values, democratic institutions, critical infrastructure, the environment and well-being”, with no clear beginning or ending, and are increasingly global (Boin, Ekengren, and Rhinard 2020: 122). Rather than a volatile whim contrasted with structural features of the polity, migration crisis and its related moral Panic becomes “a mode of representation in which daily events are regularly brought to the public’s attention” (Cohen, 2011, xxxviii). If these slow-burning or enduring crises - migration crises among others - are both a matter of data and perceptions, then it becomes crucial to understand how these perceptions are constructed, framed and contested as well as when and how attention escalates notably through media discourses.

⁵ Cross-national study of nine OECD countries shows that only Switzerland experienced rising polarisation, while polarisation significantly decreased in Sweden and Germany (Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2017).

Hypotheses

Our hypotheses derive from the aforementioned theoretical and empirical points. We first investigate the (dis)-connection between crisis discourses about migration and migration flows in real life.

Our first hypothesis seeks to further empirical knowledge on migration misperceptions and locate the sources of these public misperceptions. Secondly, we examine media polarisation and variations in the framing of crisis narratives around inflows of migrants and asylum seekers.

H1: French media use the phrase “migration-migrant crisis” absent any sharp increase of either refugees or regular or irregular immigration to France.

Our second hypothesis feeds in an interdisciplinary field of inquiry on media polarisation.

H2: Liberal newspapers are more likely to use the terms “asylum crisis” and “refugee crisis” and conservative newspapers are more likely to use the terms “migrant crisis” and “migration crisis”

Lastly, we offer a discussion on the making and mainstreaming of crisis discourses that may be valid across “types” of crises, i.e. health, environmental or political crises at large. Our third hypothesis thus leads to a theoretically-informed analysis of how crisis discourses unfold across time and may shape representations of social facts in the long run.

H3: Conservative newspapers mention the “migration crisis” across contexts generating a sense of “creeping crisis”

Data and Methodology

Data

For our dataset, we constructed a main corpus (“All articles”) (n=8,026) using the Europresse database, which contains approximately 6,500 national, regional, foreign, generalist and specialist print media outlets (Europresse, 2021). The following search terms were used: “crise des migrants” (migrant crisis), “crise migratoire” (migration crisis), “crise de l’asile” (asylum crisis), and “crise des réfugiés” (refugee crisis). Rather than a broad corpus on “migration” this research provides a focused analysis of crisis making in media discourses.

We selected the six main French national newspapers as well as their online editions, reflective of core media in French mediascape as defined by (Cointet et al 2021). Cognizant of the discussion around the relative impact of “new” digital and social media and traditional press, we chose to focus on traditional media as they reflect a larger audience pool, stabilised views, and channelling salient input from social media (SOURCE REF HERE)⁶.

⁶ We acknowledge dates on the differential impact of tradition and social media on public opinion regarding migration. An interesting follow up on our research would be to interrogate whether traditional media and newspapers in particular matter “more” than other media like television or social media in influencing public opinion or policymaking using survey results.

Focusing on the French press, we chose newspapers labelled “central/progressive” and “conservative” among the six newspapers that have the largest monthly audience. *La Croix*, *Libération*, *Le Monde* are generally considered liberal or progressive.⁷ *Le Parisien*, *Les Echos*, *Le Figaro* are generally considered conservative⁸. Our dataset thus represents a broad political spectrum (Lainé, 2019) yet remains in the scope of mainstream media, excluding extreme publications.

Given the size of our initial corpus (11,962 articles), we used automated text analysis to clean the data and run analyses.⁹ After cleaning the articles, we constructed the “All articles” corpus, which included 8,026 articles.¹⁰ There are far fewer mentions of “asylum crisis” and “refugee crisis” in the French press than expected, with unequal distribution across newspapers.

Our analysis first focuses on the entire period from the global financial crisis to the COVID-29 crisis: January 1, 2008 to the COVID-19 crisis in 2020. We selected this time frame to describe the migration crisis as one in between both creeping crises that are challenging EU legitimacy and challenging international cooperation. Since we found few occurrences of the terms before 2015, we thus created a subset limited in time to the main period of salience of crisis discourses from January 1, 2015. While the entire corpus from January 1, 2008 - April 2, 2020 has 8,026 articles, the corpus limited to January 1, 2015 - April 2, 2020 counts 7,994 articles. Our end date is April 2, 2020, the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

Building upon earlier studies such as Berry et al 2015 (covering 2014-2015) and Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017 (covering 2015), we investigate an extended period (2009-2020), examining the construction of a migration crisis in France five years before and five years after 2015 and the polarisation of migration across six major national newspapers. As Gunther and Quandt (2016) note, the distinct features of articles become more apparent when a corpus is compared with another corpus. We therefore operate multiple comparisons within our corpus to test our research hypotheses.

First, we examine descriptively how the French media constructs a “migrant crisis”, “migration crisis”, “refugee crisis”, and “asylum crisis” over time, hypothesising that the migrant vs refugee dichotomy is a conscious editorial choice on behalf of journalists and news directors. As an example, when the picture of the corpse of the three-year old Syrian boy made the news on September 2, 2015, an Al-Jazeera editorialist already highlighted the political nature of choosing between “migrant” and “refugee” to describe what was happening in Europe (Malone 2015). We find a strong echo of such terminological debates in the framing of the crisis as a refugee crisis in our corpus (see below). We therefore subset our corpus based on terminology. We thus create two subsets composed of articles labelling the crisis as a refugee-asylum one and those labelling the crisis as a migrant-migration one.

In order to test the polarisation of media discourse across conservative and liberal newspapers, we compare our search terms across two subsets composed of liberal newspapers

⁷ *Libération* is commonly identified as a left-leaning daily newspaper, *Le Monde* as centre or mainstream, *La Croix* centre-left with a Catholic identity.

⁸ *Le Figaro* is the main French generalist conservative daily, *Les Echos* is a right-leaning financial and economic daily newspaper. *Le Parisien / Aujourd'hui en France* is the national edition of an initially local newspaper that occupies a unique space as a semi-tabloid identified as centre-right.

⁹ First, we cleaned and preprocessed the corpus before running analyses. Automated coding in R was used to eliminate any duplicate articles. We filtered the corpus to include only articles with more than 500 characters. Upon closer examination of the articles, we left out articles including the term “oiseaux”, as they usually referred to migratory birds. We also eliminated articles that were a summary of main headlines.

¹⁰ More details on data cleaning and the creation of our corpus are in the Data Appendix.

on the one hand and conservative ones. We confirm our findings regarding the crisis through OLS regression.

Second, in response to the relative lack of significant inflows of migrants into France from 2010 onwards, we measure the quantitative emphasis put on a particular event or fact which becomes salient¹¹ in media discourses. We call this emphasis “event-making”, which we define as the sensationalization of specific migration-related news, such as the death of a child, Alan Kurdi in September 2015, or a boat capsizing near Lampedusa, or riots in the Calais jungle camps on the Channel coastline. Event-making also sensationalise migration events within non-migration media cycles such as French and EU elections, EU political meetings and other non-migration related news. We identify event-making processes and contrast it to the mainstreaming crisis discourses where migration crisis features in articles devoted to other topics. Mainstreaming indicates that crisis discourse about migration is embedded in longer media cycles and familiar in public perceptions.

To test the editorial emphasis put on the terms “migration-asylum crisis” in media discourses and their dissemination within the corpus, we subset the “All articles” into a “Titles only” corpus where the terms “migration or migrant” and “asylum or refugee” appear in the titles of the articles. While comparisons between “All articles” and “Titles only” in automated text analysis usually serve to decrease the size of a corpus, our comparative strategy is based on substance and editorial logics. It seeks to identify processes of *headlining* migration as a crisis and conversely, processes of *mainstreaming* the migration crisis through mentions of a “migration or migrant and asylum or refugee crisis” in articles that do not primarily deal with migration or asylum.

The comparison across subsets (All articles and Titles only, by political leaning, and by terms used corpus) thus provides a rich and innovative way to approach the different political framing of the crisis. To further quantify the intensity of polarisation processes, we thus adopt a cross subset comparative strategy. We compare the “All articles corpus” with the “Titles only corpus” to test the dynamics of sensationalising which amounts to putting “migration-asylum crisis” terms in the title and processes of mainstreaming which amount to disseminating mentions of the migration-refugee crisis in non-migration related articles. We also explore these dynamics of sensationalization or mainstreaming in the subsets of conservative and liberal newspapers.

Table 1. Corpus and Comparisons between subsets (January 1, 2008 - April 2, 2020)

	All articles Corpus				Titles only Corpus		
	<i>Political Spectrum</i>				<i>Political Spectrum</i>		
Search terms	Conservative	Liberal	Total	Search terms	Conservative	Liberal	Total
asile_refugie	689	1,065	1,756 ¹²	asile_refugie	181	386	567
migrant_migratoire	3,820	2,452	6,272	migrant_migratoire	1,112	966	2,078

¹¹ The volume or intensity of press coverage reflects the salience of a topic – the visibility of the topic or the attention it receives in the media (Tittel, 2020; Eberl et al, 2018).

¹² Two articles in the “All Articles” corpus contained asylum and refugee crisis terms and migrant and migration crisis terms.

Total	4,509	3,517	8,026 ¹³	Total	1,293	1,352	2,645
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Results & Discussion

1. Migration and Asylum Trends in France and Europe (2009-2020)

Contrary to other European countries, there was no mass increase in (irregular) immigration or in asylum numbers in France during the 2010s. France did not receive large inflows of immigrants or refugees in 2015 nor afterwards. However, while regular immigration had gone down through the first part of the 2010s¹⁴, gross numbers increased slightly and regularly after 2015 as shown in Figure A1 and A2 in the Appendix. Comparatively, the number also increased less than the EU total¹⁵.

The spike in asylum applicants numbers observed from 2014-2016 was mostly absorbed by European border countries like Italy, Greece and Malta or secondary destinations like Germany or Sweden. By contrast, asylum applications in France remained stable and their share in the overall number of new asylum applications in the EU thus dropped from 15% to 6% in 2015 while Germany was receiving over a third of all new applications (Eurostat, 2016). In 2017, asylum applications started to increase until the COVID-19 pandemic, and they reached 8 % of the EU total (OECD 2020).

Figures 1 and 2 provide information on new arrivals of asylum seekers and immigrants adjusted by population size. France contrasts with the rest of the EU in terms of relative weight of new arrivals of both migrants and refugees. The share of new immigrants arriving in Europe rose progressively between the “2015 crisis” reaching 0.7% of the total EU population in 2020 to drop afterwards. Comparatively, in France the overall share of migrant newcomers is lower and rises only to reach 0.4% of the French population that is to a much lesser extent than in the rest of the EU. In addition, in France, the number of new resident permits includes permits delivered to asylum seekers and the late blooming of immigration actually reflect the limited increase in asylum applicants featured in Figure 1.

¹³ id

¹⁴ France is an old immigration country with 8.3 million immigrants representing around 13 % of the population mainly coming from Algeria (18 %), Morocco (12 %), Portugal (8 %) and overall, the immigrant population has grown by 16 % since 2008 (OECD 2020).

¹⁵ French immigration statistics comprise all types of migration, including international students, seasonal and temporary workers staying for one year or more, family reunion, spouses of French nationals and asylum seekers/refugees. The recent increase in regular migration numbers thus mostly reflect the rise in asylum applications and in temporary labour migration (the latter being consistent by what drives migration growth in the EU as a whole).

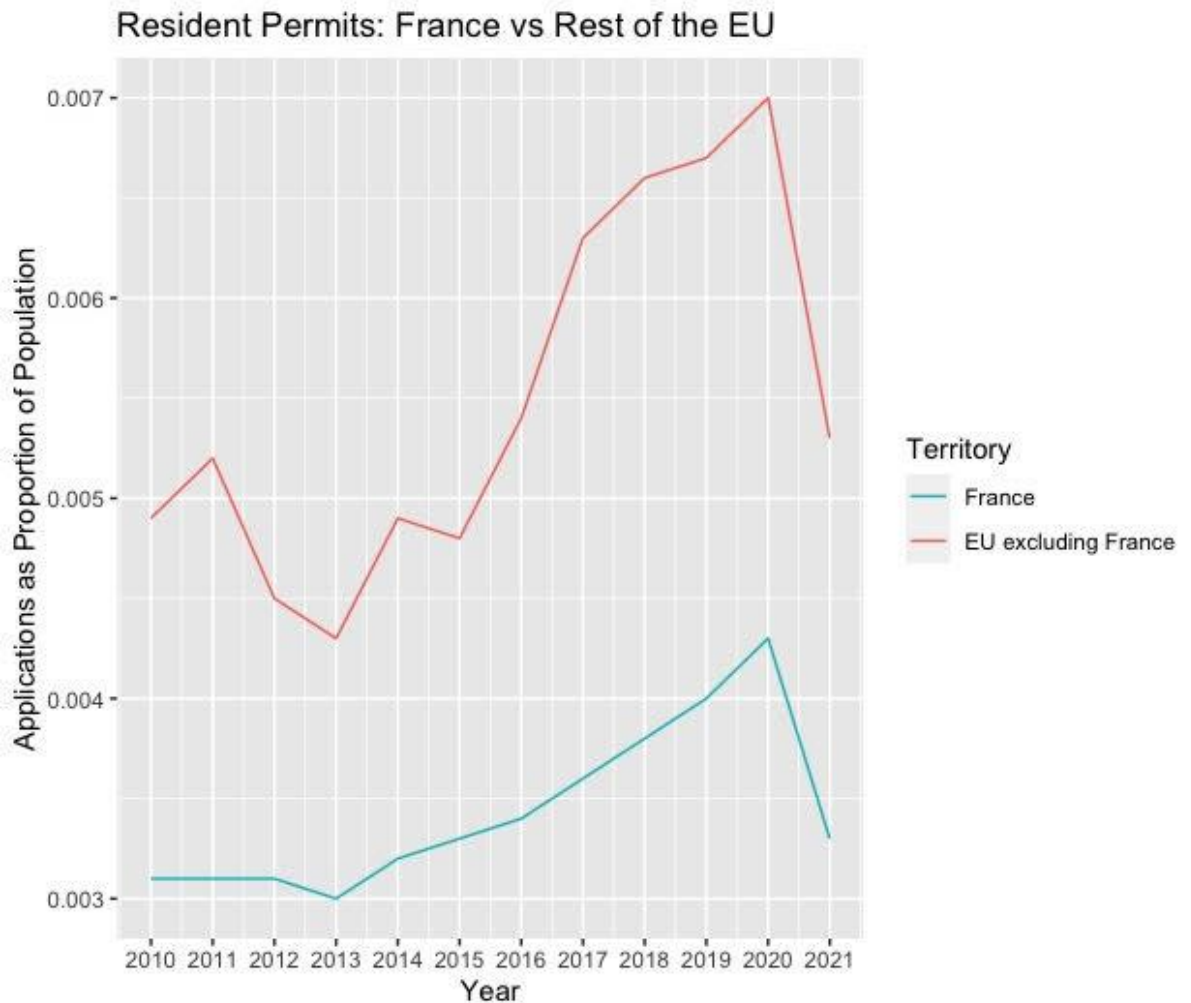


Figure 1: Share of New Immigrants in the French Population versus the Rest of the EU (210-2020). Source: Eurostat, 2021

With regards to the share of new asylum seekers, the overall discrepancy between what happened in France and in the rest of the EU is even more striking. Figure 2 shows that the peak in asylum seekers' arrivals as a share of the EU population from 2015-2018 does not implicate France. However, France experiences its own short-lived relative peak in 2018 connected with secondary movements of asylum seekers from other European countries alongside new incomers yet still representing only 0.2% of the total population during the short-lived peak.

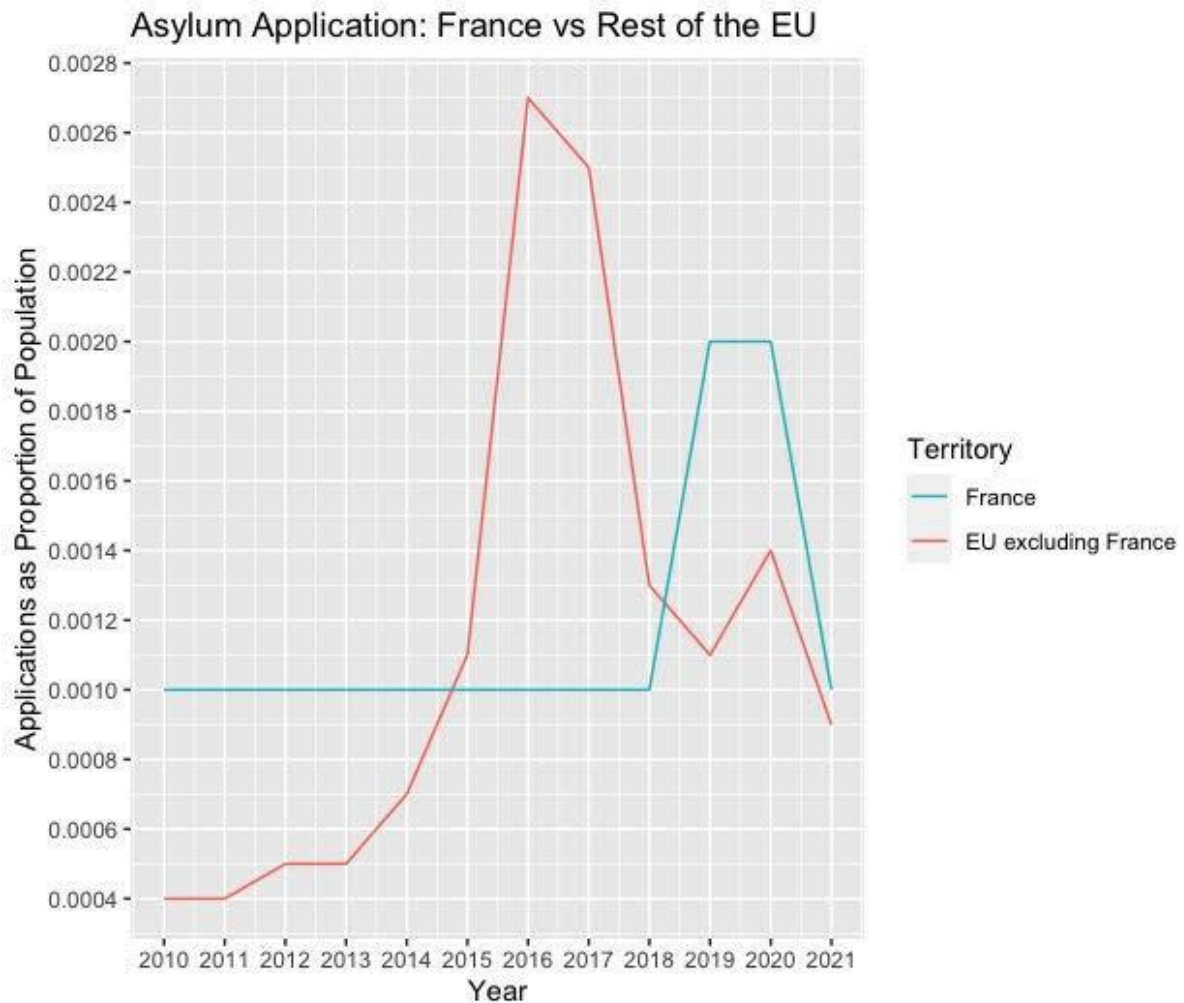


Figure 2: Share of Asylum applicants in the French Population versus the Rest of the EU (210-2020). Source: Eurostat, 2021

Turning to irregular migration - the most contentious issue in migration politics, we can only note that by construction, it is invisible, not quantifiable yet intensely politicised. Data on irregular border crossings (IBCs) provided by the European border agency Frontex often result in double or triple counts (Frontex 2021). They also quantify apprehensions regardless of the likelihood of border crossers to later obtain asylum in European countries. As shown by Savatic et al. (2021), in 2015 75.5% of people crossing borders irregularly come from Syria and other refugee sending countries and are likely to be granted asylum in destination EU countries. Across the entire decade, 54% of IBCs are likely refugees.

Using Frontex data, we note an intense but short-lived peak mostly concerning Syrian refugees crossing the Eastern Mediterranean (Figure A3 in the Appendix). Regarding migration routes that have continuous borders with France, which are the Central Mediterranean and Western Mediterranean routes going respectively through Spain and Italy, we note that they did not experience mass irregular border crossings in 2015 nor later. As shown in Figure A3 in the Appendix, the majority of so-called “irregular border crossings” mostly composed of future refugees happened through the Eastern borders of the EU mostly through Greece and the Balkans (Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans routes).

The following section introduces our textual data and describes the emergence of discourses on the “migration crisis” in France absent any abrupt mass inflows of immigrants or asylum seekers.

2. Emergence and Labelling of a generic migration crisis

Our data clearly locate the birth of the French “migration/migrant - refugee/asylum crisis” in the media. The terms “migration crisis”, “migrant crisis”, “refugee crisis”, and “asylum crisis” were hardly used in France before, even though significant migration or asylum related “crisis” were reported in the media (Cantat et al, 2019; Perron and Bazin 2018). As mentioned above, media attention for migration increased in the 1990s and again after the Arab Spring (2011) and from 2015 onwards (Eberl et al. 2018). First, Figure 3 illustrates the quasi-absence of the terms before 2015, and the successive peaks in use as well as a regular presence in discourse across newspapers. The figure also illustrates that articles using “asylum/refugee crisis” are largely less numerous than articles using “migration-migrant” crisis. Articles using the refugee-asylum crisis phrase are concentrated in shorter-lived and less intense peaks in 2015 and 2016. In the All Articles corpus mentions of the migration-migrant crisis represent 78% of all articles while mentions of the refugee-asylum crisis only concern 22% of articles (Table 4).

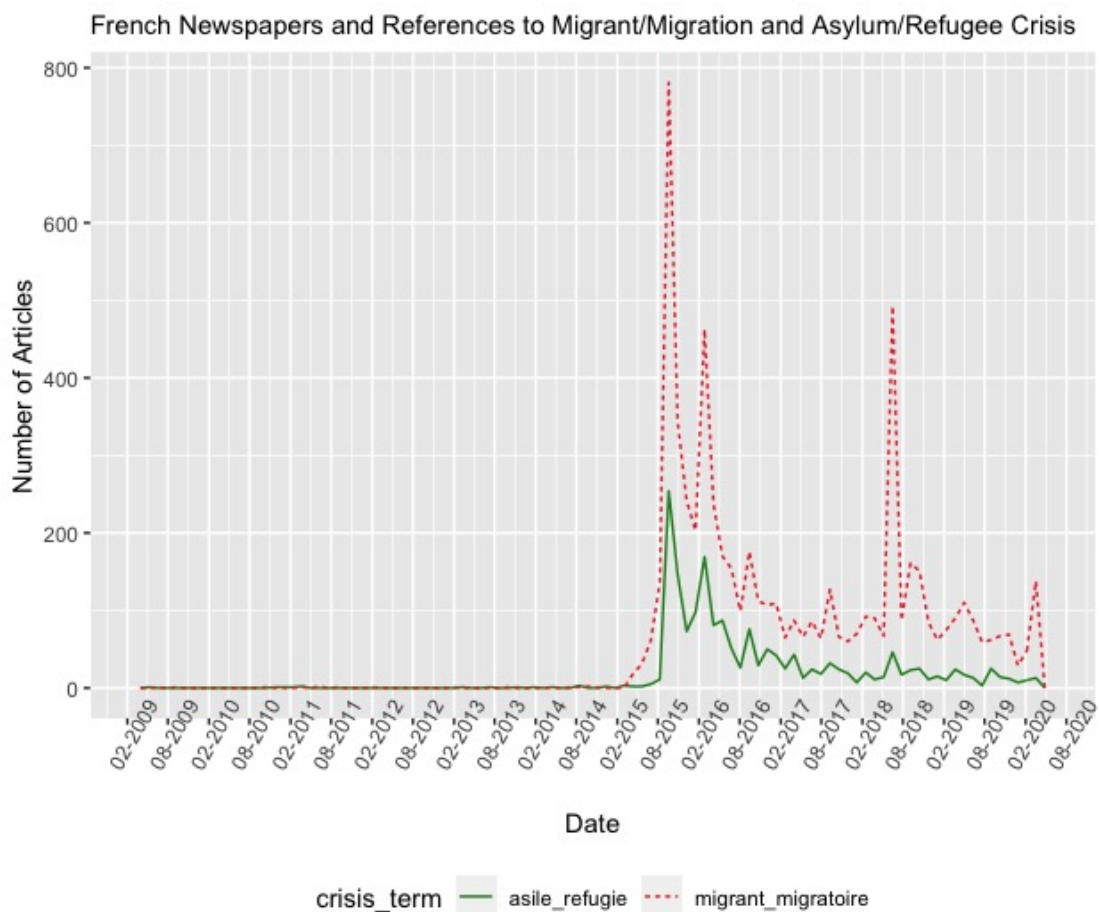


Figure 3: Cumulative count of articles mentioning Migration/Migrant and Asylum/Refugee Crisis in the All Articles corpus (2009-2020)

Whether in the All Articles or in the Titles Only subset, newspapers overwhelmingly refer to the “migration-migrant” crisis than the “asylum-refugee crisis” as illustrated in Table 6. In both corpora, the asylum crisis only features in 21-22% of the articles, indicating that even when it is *sensationalised* in headlines, events and issues connected to population movement remain massively framed as a migration issue not a humanitarian issue.

Table 2. Distribution of terms (asile_refugie crisis vs migrant_migratoire crisis) in the Full Text Corpus and the Titles Only subset in percentages.

Search Terms	Full Text Corpus (%)	Titles Only Corpus (%)
asile_refugie	22	21
migrant_migratoire	78	79
Total	100	100

Before the crisis

The first time any of the crisis terms were used from January 2008 onwards was on May 26, 2009, in an article by *La Croix* (Bernard Gorce, May 26, 2009) referring to the “refugee crisis.” The article refers to two Palestinian refugee families, originally in an Iraqi refugee camp in Syria, who were joining other refugees, mostly Chechnian and Iraq, in Créteil, France, and criticises inaction by European countries regarding the Human Rights Commission agreements to resettle refugees. One week later, another article in *La Croix* by a former centrist politician (Marielle de Sarnez, June 4, 2009) focuses on preserving European unity and the “idea of Europe.” She notes that “the major crises that threaten our future are all planetary: financial crisis, economic crisis, social crisis, environmental crisis, demographic crisis, development crisis, migration crisis, crisis of identities and crisis of values.” Relatedly, two years later, a *La Croix* op-ed notes the crisis of French values in the treatment of asylum seekers:

“left to fend for themselves, deprived of accommodation and sleeping in squats or makeshift camps without being able to seek protection from France due to the most Kafkaesque European regulations: the public authorities call this ‘the asylum crisis’...the financial crisis that is raging in European countries provides an additional argument, and so “surveillance without rescue” has become the new Republican motto in many parts of the national territory.”
-Pierre Henry, *La Croix*, January 26, 2011.

The first time a conservative newspaper, *Le Figaro*, mentions the crisis, the article refers to 30 million EUR of EU assistance to address the “refugee crisis”, to evacuate Libyans following the Arab Spring. From January 2008 until January 2014, there were only 20 articles referring to the migration crisis, mostly in liberal newspapers, and equally distributed between asylum/refugee and migrant/migration crisis. Few of the articles prior to 2015 mention “crisis” terms and they focused on refugee flows as a result of the Arab Spring (Tunisia), with a few articles discussing refugees in Chad, Myanmar, and Cuba, with a humanitarian frame on migration. Few mention criminality within some direct quotes from officials during the Sarkozy administration with reference to the Calais jungle.

Then migration starts to transform from a ripple effect of conflict in North Africa and the Middle East to an undercurrent. The conservative media start the alarm regarding migration, beginning with a *Le Figaro* article on March 24, 2011: “the French minister of the Interior [Claude Guéant] wanted to address the issue of migratory flows “without taboo” [alongside his Spanish counterpart] aware that the fight against illegal immigration has turned into a collective

fight at the external borders of the Union, where the illegals enter” (Jean-Marc Leclerc, *Le Figaro*, March 24, 2011).

The liberal-leaning *La Croix*, in October 2013, notes the emergence of migration as a “crisis” within two crises: one political, and one economic, stating that “the economic crisis and the fear of an electoral takeover of the subject of immigration by populist parties are prompting governments to adopt an approach oriented towards control and relief rather than reception” (*La Croix*, October 28, 2013, Marianne Meunier). The combination of economic and political crisis, however, arguably leads the media, and public opinion, to confound economic migration “migrants” with refugees and asylum seekers. As the article concludes: “‘however, it is not about economic immigration,’ stated Jean-François Dubost, director of migration issues at Amnesty International. ‘There is a big confusion about the people we are talking about. In most cases, they are refugees,’” (*La Croix*, October 28, 2013, Marianne Meunier).

The first article in 2014 to mention the crisis, in the liberal newspaper *Libération* focuses on a new asylum law reform, and anthropologist Didier Fassin is given space to analyse changes in the perception of refugees over time and the shift from asylum to migration:

In the mid-1970s, in France, out of ten applicants, nine obtained [asylum] after examination of their file by the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (Ofpra). Three decades later, this was the case for less than one in ten. In the meantime, immigration has become a central issue in public debate, subject to ever more restrictive policies, and the theme of “false refugees” has become commonplace, casting lasting discredit on asylum seekers, suspected of wanting to take advantage of an advantageous status when they are in fact economic migrants. What is called the asylum crisis is therefore, for some, the misappropriation of a right to protection, which the majority of asylum seekers would abuse, and for others, the decline of this right, which would henceforth be subordinated to the control of immigration...In reality, more than a quantitative change, it is a qualitative change that has taken place, in the way asylum seekers are viewed. [...] It is less the situation of asylum seekers that has changed in recent decades than the way in which they are considered.

- *Libération*, “Quelques idées reçues sur l’asile”, Didier Fassin, January 30, 2014.

Mentions of migration as a crisis start to accelerate in 2014, as conservative newspapers begin to report more often on “clandestine migration”, “the Islamic State,” while prior to 2014 there were only 4 mentions of migration as a crisis by conservative newspapers in contrast to 16 by liberal newspapers. There is less emphasis on humanitarian aspects of migration, and increasing emphasis on security issues and the inability of other European countries, notably Greece, to control borders.

This is undoubtedly the most sensitive file of the Ministry of the Interior: the explosion of migratory flows at the south-eastern border, between Menton and Ventimiglia. A massive influx of displaced people from countries at war in particular, from Syria, Libya, Eritreans, but also from many other territories in sub-Saharan Africa. No less than 100,000 foreigners in an irregular situation will thus have crossed into France at the end of the month, via the Italian border. It's not just Lampedusa, this island that serves as a buffer zone for arrivals from the Mediterranean.

- Jean-Marc Leclerc, *Le Figaro*, October 13, 2014

The expected growth in asylum numbers mentioned in the article eventually did not happen in 2015 but rather later in 2017 as shown in Figure XX above. Yet expectations of rising numbers and “mass” inflows pervaded conservative media which used numbers of new arrivals in EU border states like Greece and Italy as well as the preferred destination countries of asylum seekers which are Germany and Sweden. While discourses about expected flows did

not turn into reality in 2015, they nevertheless took foot in the media discourses across newspapers yet with varying intensity, alternating peaks of salience and lower frequencies.

The crisis

We observe that mentions of a “migration/migrant” or “asylum/refugee” crisis start to spike in April 2015 describing a “catastrophe” in Europe and crisis management efforts at the European level. Discussion is centred around irregular migration and the deaths of boatloads of migrants in the Mediterranean. Articles point to a crisis not only of migration management but of European identity, for example:

The migration crisis in the Mediterranean confronts Europe with a tragic reality that it has long preferred to deny, torn between its humanist values and the political pressure of xenophobic populists who are gaining ground at the ballot box.

- Jean-Jacques Mével, *Le Figaro*, April 21, 2015

AFTER one too many tragic events, Europe finds itself in catastrophe in front of the alternative which it has refused for a long time: save many more migrants in the Mediterranean, that is to say accept tens or even hundreds of thousands more refugees on its soil - or sacrifice its ideals and its image of “benevolent power” by letting other overloaded boats sink into the blue waters south of Sicily.

- *Libération*, April 21, 2015

Focusing on these peaks of media attention, we identify three main moments of extreme salience of either migrant/migration and/or refugee/asylum crisis discourses (Table 2). The first peak is clearly driven by the mass inflow of asylum seekers across Eastern Europe to Germany and the connected moral panic around the publication of the picture of Alan Kurdi during the Summer of 2015. In September 2015, 893 articles mentioning either “migration-migrant or asylum-refugee crisis” were found representing over 11% of the corpus. The peaks of the Summer of 2015 and Spring 2016 are part of the same broader media cycle. Salience of both crisis terms remains high during the entire cycle with median frequency around 212 articles per month from the summer of 2015 to January 2017 (see Table B.1 in Appendix).

The epicentres of media attention are located in the months of September 2015, June 2018 and March 2016. Overall, these three months represent 22.1% of all the articles mentioning either migration-migrant or asylum-refugee crisis (see Table B.1 in Appendix). In all three cases both “migration-migrant” and “refugee-asylum” terms are used.

Table 3. Main peaks in Salience and Corresponding Events

Main themes of articles and related events if any	Peaks in “migration crisis”	Peaks in “refugee crisis”
(Summer 2015) Asylum policies by Angela Merkel’s and EU reactions and death of Alan Kurdi whose picture has a strong resonance	2015/9/9 - 2015/10/15	2015/9/6-2015/9/15
(March 2016) EU-Turkey summit and tensions between members states (Austria, Greece, Germany; partial dismantlement of the Calais “jungle”	2016/3/4 - 2016/3/17	2016/2/21- 2016/3/13

(informal settlement) and France-UK summit in Amiens

(June 2018) Migrant rescue operations (Aquarius boat full of migrants stranded in the Mediterranean) are criminalised in Italy and Hungary. Migration politics in Germany and in Greece. 2018/6/17 - 2018/7/1 2018/6/10-2018/7/11

The last short-lived peak (March 1-5, 2020) of media attention stands alone out of a broader media cycle in 2020. It occurs after the beginning of another crisis which substantially decreases the overall interest for migration and asylum, the COVID-19 crisis. It deals with Turkey's threat to let migrants cross EU borders and immigrant inflows in Greece as the COVID-19 crisis emerges and illustrates the growth of migration as a diplomatic leverage for transit and sending countries. It singled out an exclusive use of the terms "migration-migrant crisis" and no reference to refugees or asylum seekers.

Ripple effects

We identify other relative peaks of media attention, although much more modest in frequency, around September 2016, March and September 2017, and May 2019. We will explore below how they contribute to the mainstreaming of the migration crisis in the French media. The first two are part of broader media cycles initiated by more intense peaks. The main themes of these minor peaks are harder to pinpoint. However these minor peaks often connect European migration-related events to the French context.

The relative peak of September 2016 corresponds the coverage of border politics in Hungary and other Eastern European countries and toughening of German deportation policies as populist parties rise across Europe; French electoral context (right-wing primary designation) and Calais jungle tensions in France leading to announcements of total dismantling (Sept. 26 2016); failed UN summit on refugees and OECD's stances on migration. It refers to both the migration-migrant and refugee-asylum crisis terms.

The relative peak of September 26, 2017 corresponds to the German elections and the entrance of radical right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the parliament as the third-largest party. Articles also connect migration-migrants crisis to politics of return for irregular migrants across the EU. While media attention does not correspond to any peak in irregular arrivals across EU borders (see Figure A.3 in the Appendix), it resonates with the relative increase of secondary movements of migrants and asylum seekers to France as seen in Figure 1 and 2.

These minor peaks predominantly use the label "migration-migrant" crisis, and mentions of the "asylum-refugee crisis" are less significant. They correspond to instances when European and international politics of migration and asylum are connected to the French context. French media focused on the management of the Calais "Jungle," that is the informal settlement of asylum seekers and irregular migrants near Calais and the Eurotunnel entrance to the United Kingdom, after a visit of President François Hollande there reminiscent of a previous political decision taken by Nicolas Sarkozy while he was Minister of the Interior.¹⁶ Calais became a bone of contention in the context of the French right-wing primaries in September 2016 with the 2017 Presidential insight for most right wing leaders. Articles also

¹⁶ See for instance in our corpus [697] in *Le Figaro*, no. 22435, 2016-09-27 "The Touquet agreements in the heart of the polemic between London and Paris"

browse EU politics regarding the relocation of refugees¹⁷ and the reactions of Prime Minister Viktor Orban in Hungary in the broader context of the opening of the United Nations 71st General Assembly and its failure to bring about coordinated responses to the refugee crisis among other world crises.¹⁸

The following section explores the political polarisation of crisis discourses. It shows that conservative newspapers are overall largely driving the emergence and salience of the “migration crisis.” It also shows how conservative and liberal newspapers frame and label the crisis differently.

3. Polarisation

Although the terms “migration or migrant crisis” are dominant in the corpus, we find that conservative newspapers use the terms more than liberal ones as they represent 56% of our All Articles corpus (Table 4). Yet differences in the salience of both phrases across subsets of articles by political leaning. This comparison indicates a politicization in the use of one phrase of the other, as well as the frequency of reference to “migrations crisis” discourses. The preferences for using “migration crisis” in conservative media is exactly symmetrical (61% of the corpus) to that of using “asylum crisis” in liberal ones (see Table 4).

Focusing on the Titles Only subset (Table 5), we note that polarisation is much more acute: liberal newspapers tend to sensationalise the crisis more than conservative newspapers and they frame the crisis as an asylum or refugee one more as well.

Table 4. Salience of terms used in subsets by political leaning of the source for in the All articles corpus (in percentages)

Search Terms	All articles Corpus	
	<i>Political Spectrum</i>	
	Conservative (%)	Liberal (%)
asile_refugie	39	61
migrant_migratoire	61	39
Total	56	44

Table 5. Salience of terms used in subsets by political leaning of the source for in the Title only corpus (in percentages)

¹⁷ See for instance in our corpus [687] in *Le Monde.fr* on 2016-10-03 “Relocalisation of refugees: The EU still lagging behind its own objectives...It was the peak of the migrant crisis, when thousands of them were flocking to the borders of European countries. In September 2015, the European commission established quotas to relocate asylum seekers across Europe to help member states to deal with mass inflows.”

¹⁸ See for instance in our corpus [716] *Les Echos*, 2016-09-19, no. 22279, "UN: a general assembly under the sign of powerlessness (Jacques-Hubert Rodier)...Refugees, Syria, climate change, terrorism, Brexit, new tensions in Eastern Europe and Ukraine, [not forgetting all the threats of conflicts in Africa ... All these crises are weighing upon the opening of the 71st general assembly of the UN next Tuesday...”

Titles only Corpus		
<i>Political Spectrum</i>		
Search Terms	Conservative (%)	Liberal (%)
asile_refugie	32	68
migrant_migratoire	54	46
Total	49	51

In the next section, we first compare the salience of articles using “migrant-migration crisis” or “refugee-asylum crisis” across the conservative newspaper and liberal newspaper subsets and across the All Articles and Titles Only subset. We then zoom in on the first peak of our corpus, in Summer 2015 for qualitative analysis of the polarisation process.

Migration/Migrant or Asylum/Refugee Crisis ? Polarised Editorial Choices

On a more granular level, the data illustrate that more articles mention the crisis in conservative than in liberal newspapers and that both groups use terms differently. As we established earlier, peaks in cross-border flows are limited to 2015 and concern refugees mostly from Syria at the Eastern European borders with the UK and Germany as the main secondary destinations (Savatic et al 2021). However, our data show that French media generally frames a “migrant or migration” crisis and not as a refugee or asylum crisis. 78 % of our corpus mentions “migrant or migration crisis” against 22 % for “refugee or asylum crisis.” Mentions of the “refugee crisis” are also present at the onset of the period but disappear rapidly (Figure 3). The terms migrant or refugee crisis are employed in various contexts although references to the “refuge-asylum” crisis are more common in articles that focus on the Middle East and the vulnerability of foreigners.

It could be argued that migration is a generic term referring to both migrants and refugee movements. However, as we show below, framing the crisis as one of migration sidelines the humanitarian dimension of mass inflows involving refugees and asylum seekers. Crisis discourses in our corpus offer dichotomous representations of the crisis being a migrant-migration vs refugee-asylum crisis and newcomers as either refugees or irregular migrants. Such labelling processes are often analysed as a way to demarcate the “deserving” refugee from the “undeserving” migrant (Holmes and Catsanedas 2016) and “culprits” (De Genova 2007). They construct moral and political preferences which in turn translate in or provide legitimacy to public policies. The term “migrant” often encompasses various meanings and connotations from arrivals, to economic migration to long-term integration and identity issues.¹⁹ While neither migrant nor refugee flows increased rapidly and substantially over the period in France, the distinction between both categories infused media discourse.

Figure 4 shows that articles in conservative newspapers overwhelmingly use the phrases “migration and migrant crisis” over “refugee or asylum crisis” from 2015 onwards, regardless of the nature and characteristics of migration inflows actually happening across Europe. Liberal newspapers appear more likely to use the terms “refugee or asylum crisis” than

¹⁹ The use of “migration” in our corpus focused on “migration crisis” or “asylum crisis” often serves as a proxy for *irregular* arrivals across borders or irregular immigrants. Regular immigration is less discussed in the articles of our corpus, except in link with economic and employment issues.

conservative news however even in liberal newspapers the terms “refugee or asylum crisis” begin to fall into disuse by mid-2016 (Figure 5). Both groups also adopt a marginally differential labelling of the crisis according to the preexisting political leaning of newspapers. The difference in terminology may be salient around specific events such as the Merkel and Aylan Kurdi event in the Summer of 2015 where both groups converge to label the crisis as one of asylum-refugee.

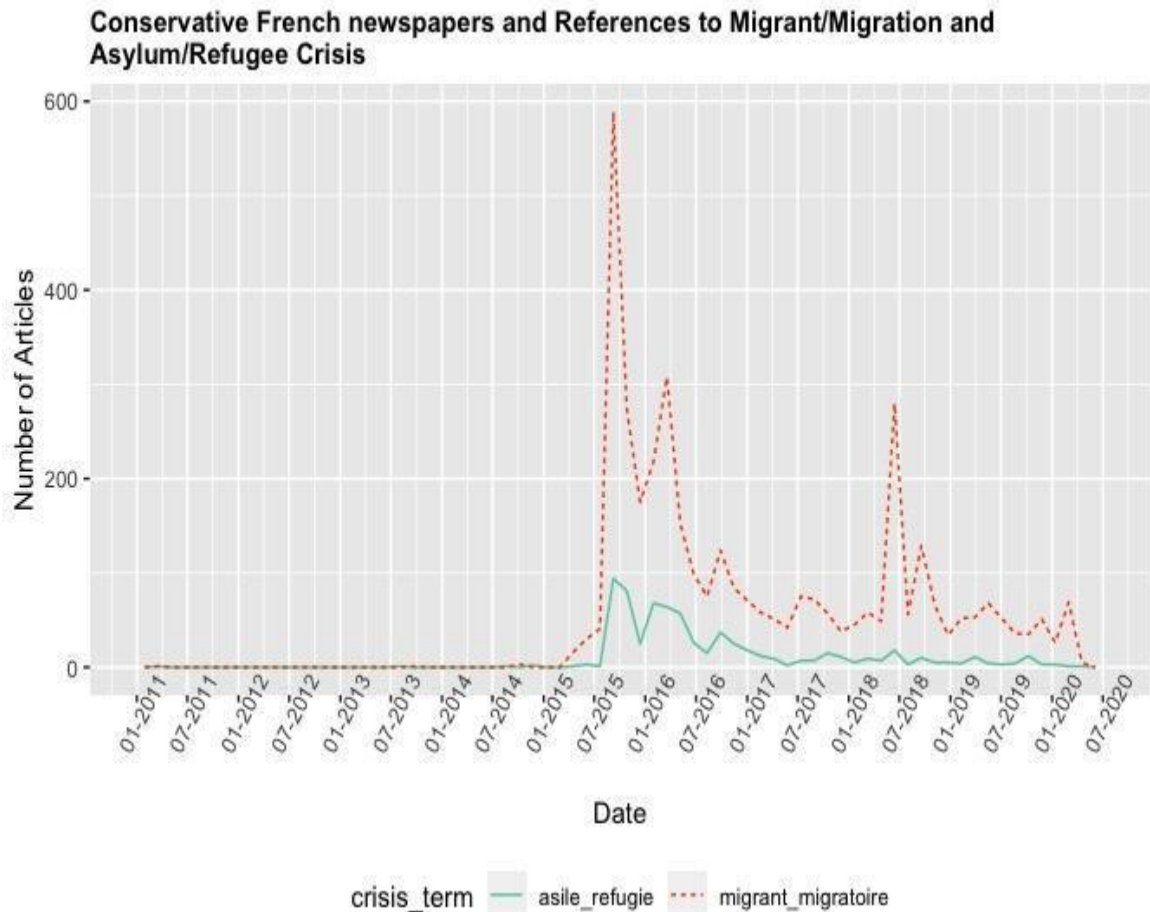


Figure 4: Reference to Migration/migration and Asylum/Refugee Crisis in Conservative Newspapers in the All Articles corpus

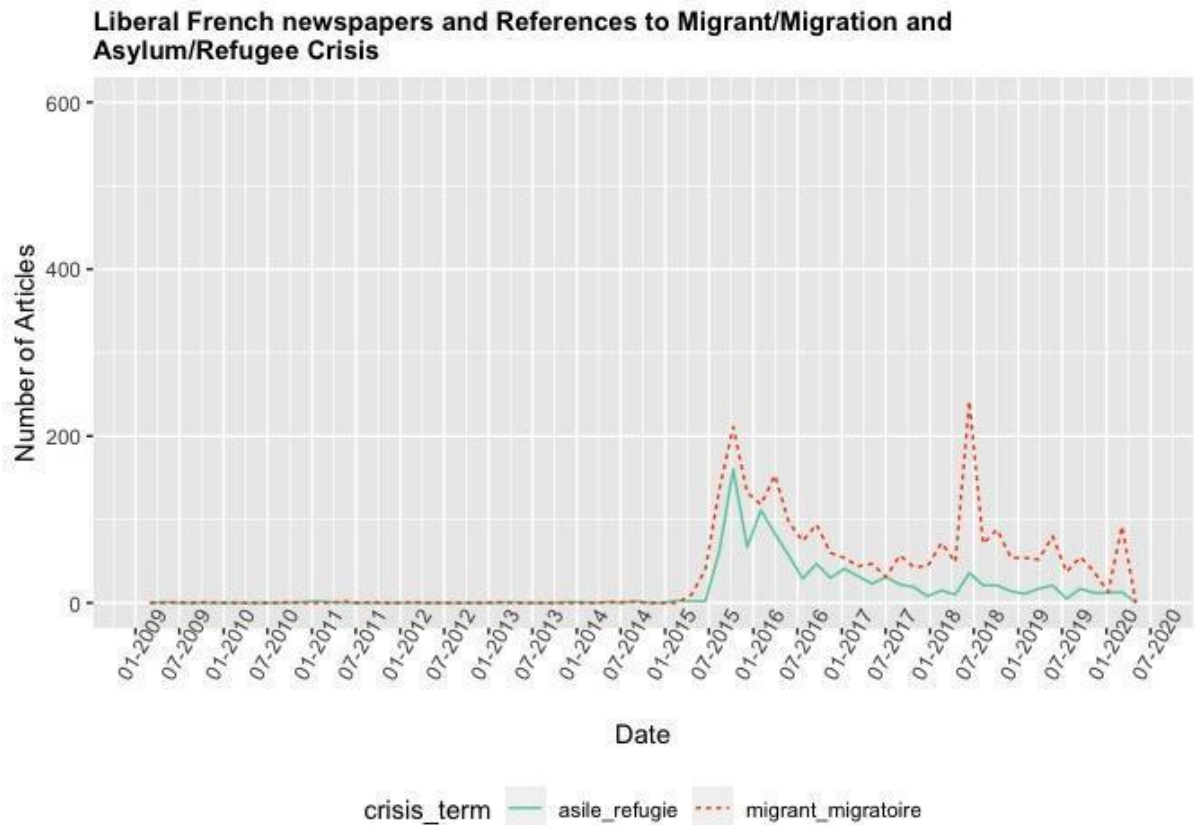


Figure 5: Reference to Migration/migration and Asylum/Refugee Crisis in Liberal Newspapers in the All Articles corpus

Through OLS regression, confirm that liberal newspapers are more likely *overall* to use the terms “asylum or refugee crisis” more frequently. As illustrated in Table 6, it is clear that liberal newspapers are significantly more likely than conservative newspapers in France to use the terms “asylum crisis” and “refugee crisis” ($p < 0.01$)²⁰, and conservative newspapers (“Constant”) are significantly less likely to use the terms “asylum crisis” and “refugee crisis.”

Table 6. Mentions of Asylum Crisis and Refugee Crisis in Liberal versus Conservative Newspapers (1/2008-4/2020)

²⁰ We also tested whether conservative newspapers are more likely to use the term “migrants and migration crisis” than liberal newspapers, using OLS regression. Since both conservative and liberal media use the term, we did not find that conservative newspapers were significantly more likely to use the terms “migrant and migration crisis.”

<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
Frequency of Asylum Crisis and Refugee Crisis	
Liberal Newspaper	0.879*** (0.055)
Constant	-1.713*** (0.041)
Observations	8,026
Log Likelihood	-4,084.531
Akaike Inf. Crit.	8,173.063
<i>Note:</i>	* p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

In the following, we focus on the first peak in salience (Table 3) and provide a qualitative analysis of media content across political leanings, thus illustrating variation in the construction of crisis discourses.

In Summer 2015, newspapers regularly addressed the ongoing inflows of asylum seekers and migration to Europe mostly as a “migrant” or “migration” crisis. Articles increasingly discuss the situation in Greece and Italy, the political mobilisation there, and comment upon Angela Merkel’s decision to open the German border to Syrian asylum seekers. The label “crise des réfugiés” starts to be used by journalists to describe the German situation, in echo with the discourses of Angela Merkel. Newspapers document local and regional initiatives to welcome refugees in Germany as well as international reactions to Merkel’s generous asylum policy. Articles also reflect upon the European dimension of the crisis using “migrant” labelling pointing at the lack of solidarity among European member states regarding sharing the burden of the crisis, notably by helping border states like Italy and Greece. The majority of articles are published in right-wing newspapers even though left-wing outlets take up the topic in August 2015.

The emergence of more frequent use of “refugee” instead of “migrant” crisis is progressive through the summer. However, with the publication of the photograph of Alan Kurdi (initially called Aylan) on September 2, 2015, the terminology changes and both right and left leaning newspapers adopt the “asylum” or “refugee crisis” labelling. Our data illustrate how publication of Alan Kurdi’s picture works as a temporary game-changer. The number of articles peaks. The “refugee or asylum crisis” prevails as a frame and the tone of the article changes, insisting on the plight of asylum seekers, the dangers of travelling through irregular routes, the situation in countries of origin. The image of the Syrian boy, washed up on the shore, migrated around the world and echoed the photograph of a young girl fleeing a napalm attack on her village during the Vietnam War, an image often credited with catalysing the end of popular support for the American intervention. Nilüfer Demir’s photograph of Alan Kurdi turned asylum-seekers’ border crossings in Eastern Europe into a media event, launching intense political debates within media redactions and instigating European public opinion and policymakers. Around this event, representations of migration flows in the press shifted temporarily towards what ethnographers have called “methodological humanitarianism” (Yarris and Castañeda 2015), in contrast to the “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) which emphasises the opposition between national citizens and strangers. The media coverage of this event rebalances the left vs right leaning newspapers: building upon the media shock of the picture, left-wing newspapers give a more extensive coverage of the crisis than before.

Only ten days later, on September 12, 2015, mixed terminologies resurfaced even in central-left wing *Le Monde* (#7964 in our corpus). The massive use of the refugee/asylum crisis fades progressively through the month and the “migrant” crisis prevails again in October. We find that articles from liberal and conservative newspapers may treat the same event differently, choosing to label it a migration or migrant crisis rather than a refugee or asylum crisis or vice versa.

In the next section, we contrast the acute peaks in media attention not only with the absence of “migration crisis” discourses prior to 2015 but also with a “background noise” pervading media contents. The diffusion of the phrase “migration crisis” as background noise in media discourses since 2015 is also highly polarised and led by conservative media. We show how the mainstreaming of crisis discourses about migration in conservative media impose the idea of a “permanent” state of crisis around migration.

4. The *creeping* Migration Crisis

We identify three intense moments of media attention in Section 2 with outstanding numbers of articles mentioning the migration crisis. Between the Summer of 2015 and January 2017, a long media cycle maintains a high frequency of crisis terms with more than a hundred articles each month (see Table B.1 in the Appendix). Apart from this long media cycle, we observe several minor peaks of lesser intensity (in September 2016, March 2017, September 2017, May 2019 and March 2020 in Figure 3) alongside regular mentions of crisis terms across the total period of 2015 to 2020. These variations contrast with the absence of crisis discourse prior to 2015 and its fading at the beginning of the COVID crisis in 2020. Overall, the media-made migration crisis starts abruptly, comprised of major and minor peaks and a general pervasiveness of mentions of the “migration/asylum crisis” in newspapers articles. This result is particularly notable as “creeping crises” typically often lack a clear beginning or ending, as a result, there has been limited analysis of the incubation phase (Boin, Ekengren, and Rhinard, 2020). Most of these enduring crises are the result of a process (incubation, escalation, and root causes, development and death) yet they are not necessarily linear.

To better understand how migration crisis discourses become pervasive, we investigate the variations across political leaning in the event-making and mainstreaming of “migration crisis” discourses. We also compare the “All Articles” corpus with the “Titles Only” subsets to unpack the mechanisms behind the politicisation of the migration crisis either as an exceptional historical event or as a permanent or latent state of things.

As described in Table 7, in the Title only corpus, liberal newspapers have slightly more articles headlining the crisis (n=1352) than conservative papers (n=1293). In contrast, in the “All articles” corpus, conservative newspapers, (n=4,509) have more mentions than liberal newspapers (n=3,517) (see Table 1). We have already shown that the use of “migration” or “asylum” crisis is more polarised in the Titles Only corpus than in the general corpus: 68 % of Liberal articles use “refugee or asylum crisis” (compared to 61% in the All articles corpus) and 54% of conservative articles use “migration or migrant crisis” (compared to 61% in the All articles corpus). Overall, sources from both political leanings use the phrase “refugee crisis” more in headlines than in entire articles.

Table 7. Salience of terms used in subsets by political leaning of the source for in the Titles Only subset (in %)

Search terms	Conservative (%)	Liberal (%)
asile_refugie	32	68
migrant_migratoire	54	46
Total	49	51

This distribution shows that conservative articles tend to embed references to the migration crisis in articles that deal with other topics (domestic politics, international relations), thus constructing a slow-burning crisis effect in media discourses which show in the “All Articles” corpus (Figure 4 for Conservative newspapers only). Looking at the content of articles in conservative newspapers in the “All Articles” corpus, we find that mentions of the “migration crisis” became background noise in daily news with fewer details on migration events. While newspapers of both sides tend to mainstream the use of the term “migration crisis” to a certain extent, our data show that conservative newspapers contribute more than liberal ones to the construction of the creeping crisis, as described in our introduction.

Conversely, using references to the “asylum-refugee or migrant-migration crisis” in the headlines is a way to sensationalise migration issues. Liberal newspapers attract the attention of readers and frame information about the crisis as a crisis of refugees and asylum. Migration “as a crisis” first appears in liberal-leaning *Le Monde* in October 2010 “Athens requests EU aid to address a migration crisis”, and then crisis in titles does not appear until 2015 in conservative-leaning *Le Figaro* “EU: Actions against the migration crisis.” Liberal newspapers tend to use this editorialising technique more than conservative newspapers and thus drive salience of terms in the “Titles Only” corpus as shown in Figure 7 and 8.

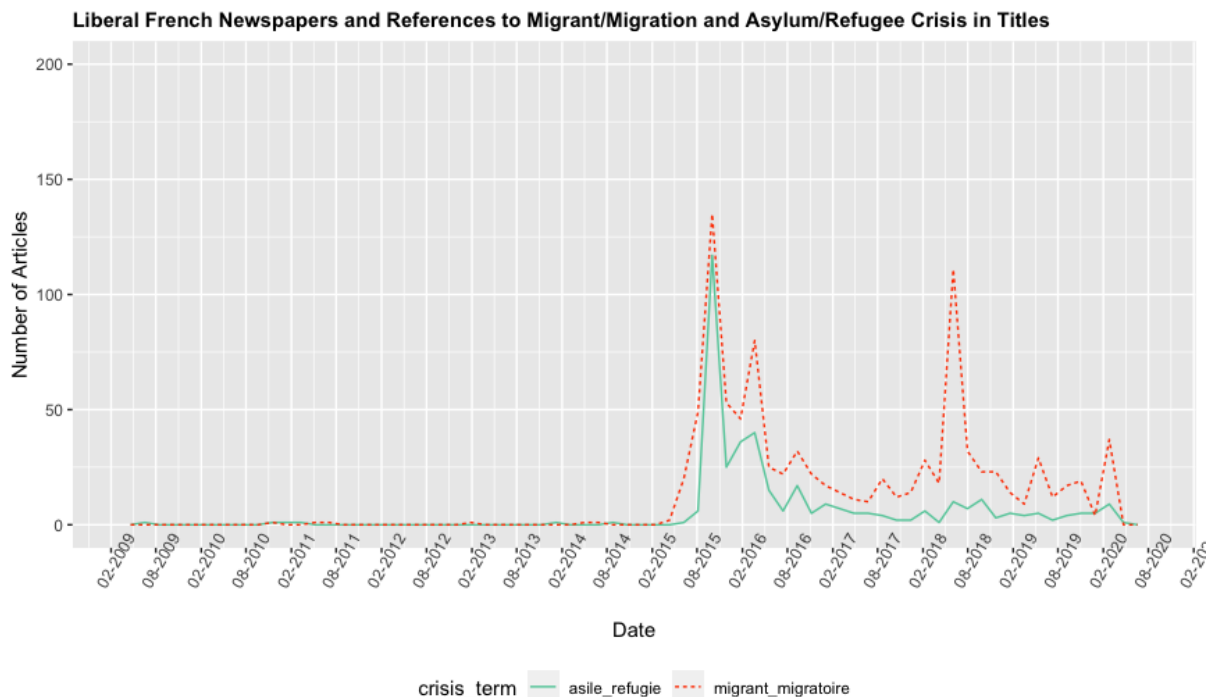


Figure 6: Reference to Migration/migration and Asylum/Refugee Crisis in Liberal Newspapers (Titles Only)

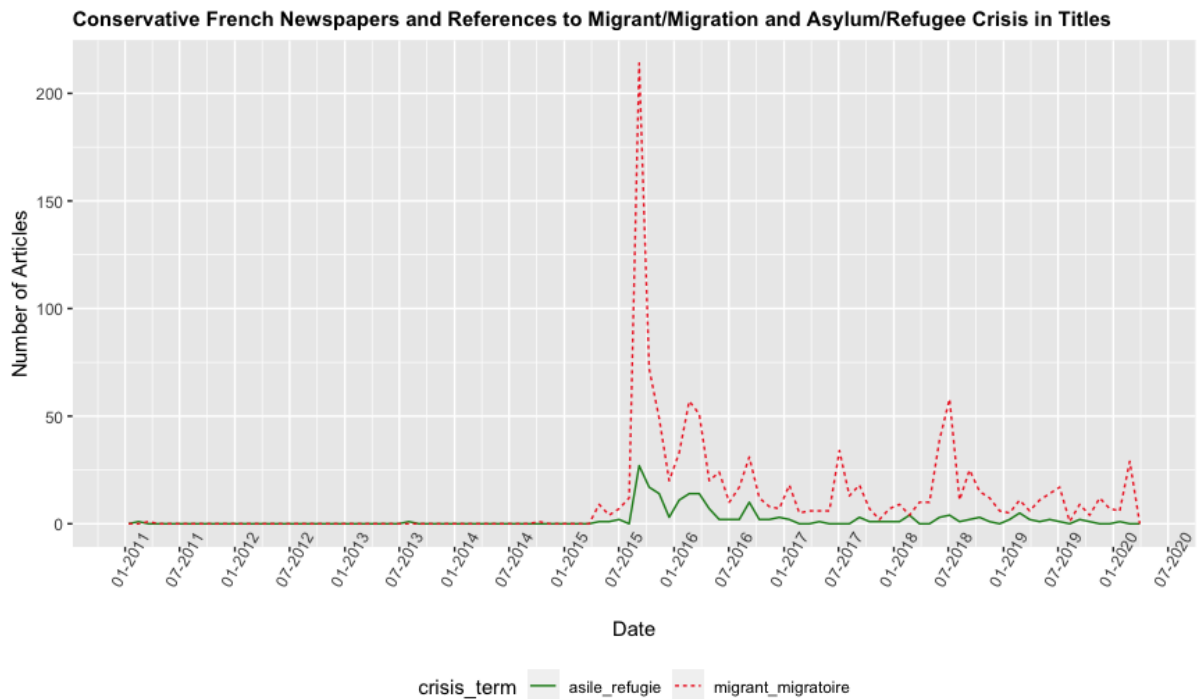


Figure 7: Reference to Migration/migration and Asylum/Refugee Crisis in Conservative Newspapers (Titles Only)

We find that liberal newspapers tend to sensationalise the crisis as a “refugee crisis” more than a migration crisis notably between 2015 and 2016 thus emphasising its humanitarian dimension. Conservative newspapers - although engaging in this sensationalization process - generally refer to the “migration / migrant crisis” in articles in headlines, just like they do in the “All Articles” corpus where most articles are not dealing specifically with migration or asylum issues. Even in June 2015, the liberal-leaning newspaper, *Libération*, had a headline stating “The distinction between refugees and migrants is applied in an unjust fashion” using a quote from Oxford-based anthropologist Ruben Andersson (*Libération*, June 24, 2015). One month later, the conservative-leaning *Le Figaro* appealed to nationalist sentiment with the headline “To resolve the migrant crisis, a British deputy wants to reconquer Calais” (*Le Figaro*, July 31, 2015). Overall, headlines containing mentions of migration crisis, migrant crisis, asylum crisis, and refugee crisis focus very heavily on the management of the crisis at Europe’s borders (Greece, Italy, Hungary, Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey), and at the European level, with very limited mentions of the situation of the migrants themselves in titles. As one *Le Figaro* article notes through its headline “The migration crisis: a ‘crash test’ for Europe” (*Le Figaro*, September 15, 2015), the crisis even takes on nuances of warfare in the liberal press through references such as “Migrant crisis: tension in the no man’s land at the border between Macedonia and Greece” (*Le Monde*, August 21, 2015).

However, interest in the migration crisis tends to wane for both conservative and liberal newspapers with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our data nevertheless show that while steeply decreasing, the mention of “migration crisis” alone seems to maintain some resonance in media discourse in the context of the global pandemic. The successive migration and COVID-19 crises open new avenues to analyse the discursive production of successive crises as a characteristic of the contemporary public sphere. On the other hand, when Belarussian president Lukashenko brought migrants to Polish borders (which are EU borders), he resurrected the “migration crisis” amidst pandemic times. This unveils the ebbs and flows of

politicisation and the social construction of a “state of permanent crisis” in Europe (Voltolini et al 2020).

Conclusion

This article introduces a series of methodological, empirical, and theoretical points opening venues for comparative research that are policy relevant.

We bring in innovative methods to analyse large text datasets using a combination of comparisons across subsets. Comparisons are based on quantitative and qualitative analysis of textual content and context to test targeted hypotheses. We add to classical comparisons between media sources of different political leanings that test political polarisation across news outlets, and analyse the rhetorical strategies found in all media corpus: the sensationalisation strategy tested through comparing Titles Only vs All Articles subset. Importantly, we also call attention to the diachrony of media cycle by comparing the mainstreaming/event-making strategy comparing peaks of media occurrences with back-ground noise (low frequency mentions). Such methods could be extended to other traditional and social media sources and used in other contexts for comparative research.

Empirically, we show that despite the fact 2015 mass arrivals of Syrian refugees at EU borders had no impact on immigration numbers in France, immigration flows became perceived as a permanent crisis in the public sphere. This perception of migration “as crisis” really emerged in 2015 although politicisation of migration issues pre-exists in the French context. It is disconnected from migration numbers to France and right-wing media largely drive migration framing and thus potentially impact perceptions of migration realities.

Again, here our results call for comparative research across contexts, notably the United States (Durand and Massey 2019) considering inflows of Central American asylum seekers, comparisons across time on Ukrainian refugees since the beginning of the 2022 war in Ukraine and possible other contexts of mass reception like Afghan refugees in Iran, Venezuelans in Colombia, Ethiopians in Sudan and broadly across African and European countries (Fengler et al 2022). Theoretically and comparatively, our results open avenues for systemic research on the making of crises across national contexts regarding migration but also beyond migration. Other research may also build upon our results and methodological inputs to explore the making of crises and moral panics about climate change, criminality for instance or compare migration with other crises including COVID-19 to extract commonalities and mechanisms at work in the social construction of crises.

In terms of behavioural and policy implications, the use of “migration crisis” discourse is not new, episodically, or consistently constructing migration as a crisis provides grounds for long-lasting and pervasive moral panic. Moral panic maybe “good” or “bad” based on their relation to confirmed social facts (serving as a warning mechanism for mobilisation in the case of climate change for instance) but they are always politically instrumentalised (Cohen 2011 [1972]). In the case of migration crises, the moral panic around foreigners' arrival may be driven by fear of irregular migration triggering xenophobic attitudes, or compassion for refugees as a *positive* panic preparing destination countries and public opinions for welcoming asylum policies. Yet the impact of crisis discourses remains to be investigated through further comparative studies on public opinions and policy making.

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Data Appendix

A. Migrant and Refugee Flows to Europe, and France

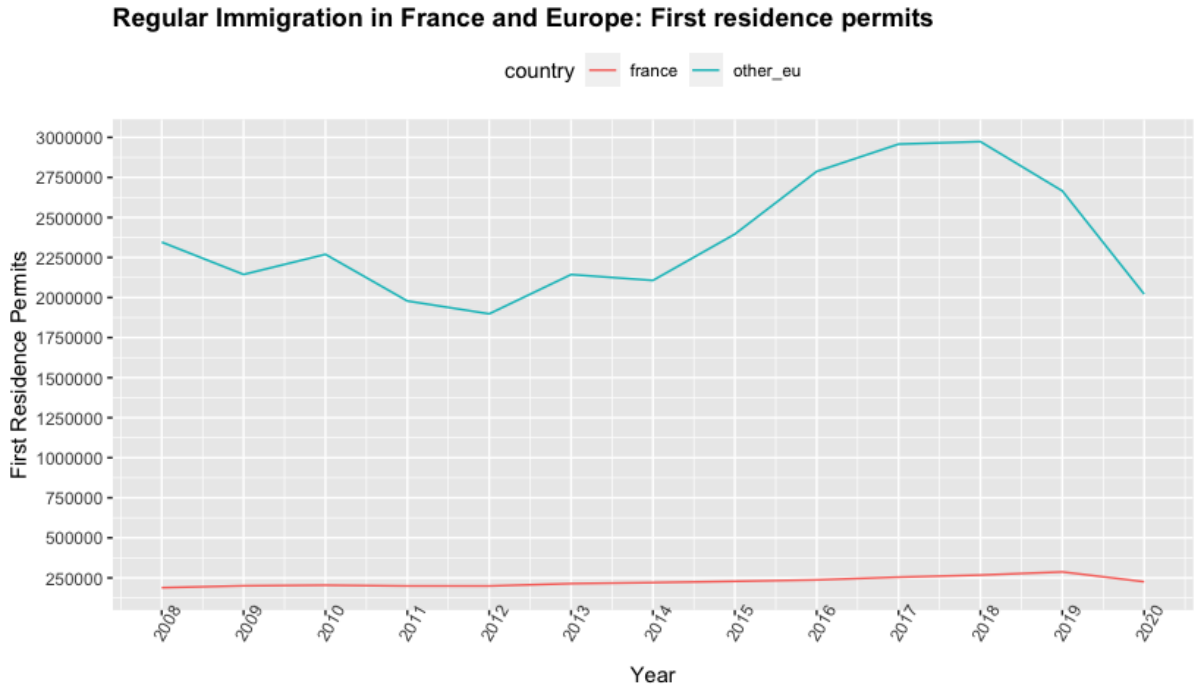


Figure A.1. Regular Migration in France versus Europe: First Residence Permits.
Source: Eurostat, 2021

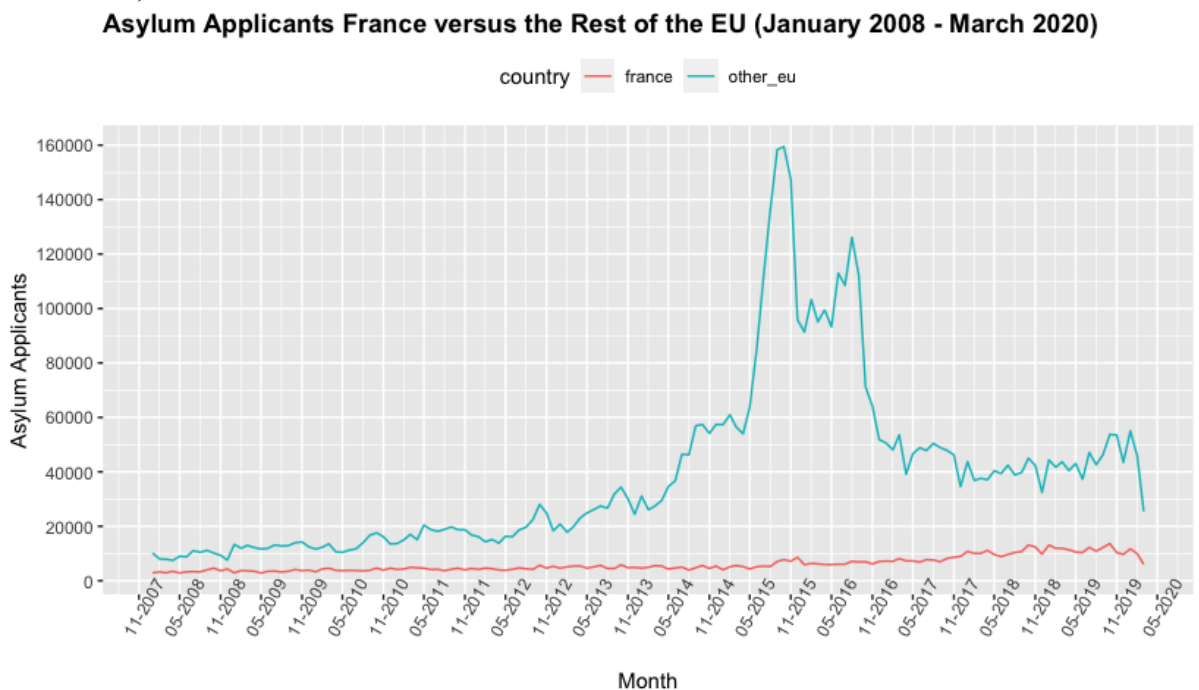


Figure A.2. Asylum applicants in France versus the Rest of the EU (Jan 2008-March 2020). Source: Eurostat, 2021

Illegal Border Crossing (IBC) in France and Europe

(January 2008 - March 2020)

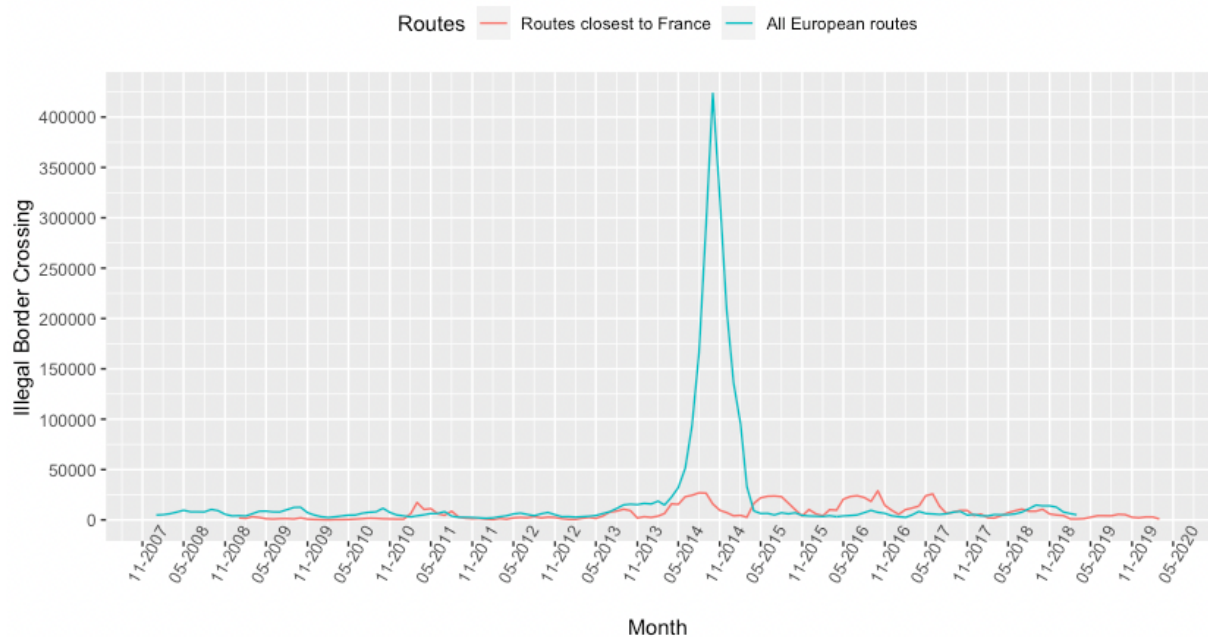


Figure A.3. Irregular Border Crossings (IBCs) to Europe with a focus on the migration routes that are closest to France (Central and Western Mediterranean route). Source: FRONTEX, 2020

B. Corpus data

Table B.1 Frequency table of mentions of our search terms in the All articles corpus

Date (entire month)	Frequency	Percentage
5/2009	1	0.0
6/2009	1	0.0
9/2009	1	0.0
10/2010	1	0.0
11/2010	1	0.0
1/2011	2	0.0
3/2011	3	0.0
6/2011	2	0.0
8/2011	1	0.0
2/2012	1	0.0
1/2013	1	0.0
3/2013	1	0.0
7/2013	1	0.0
10/2013	2	0.0
1/2014	1	0.0
4/2014	2	0.0
7/2014	1	0.0
8/2014	4	0.0

9/2014	1	0.0
10/2014	2	0.0
12/2014	2	0.0
2/2015	3	0.0
4/2015	20	0.2
5/2015	25	0.3
6/2015	48	0.6
7/2015	33	0.4
8/2015	179	2.2
9/2015	893	11.1
10/2015	403	5.0
11/2015	302	3.8
12/2015	221	2.8
1/2016	232	2.9
2/2016	353	4.4
3/2016	428	5.3
4/2016	234	2.9
5/2016	212	2.6
6/2016	172	2.1
7/2016	108	1.3
8/2016	106	1.3
9/2016	211	2.6
10/2016	130	1.6
11/2016	92	1.1
12/2016	110	1.4
1/2017	131	1.6
2/2017	60	0.7
3/2017	111	1.4
4/2017	66	0.8
5/2017	62	0.8
6/2017	74	0.9
7/2017	85	1.1
8/2017	76	0.9
9/2017	126	1.6
10/2017	72	0.9
11/2017	54	0.7
12/2017	56	0.7
1/2018	64	0.8
2/2018	65	0.8
3/2018	98	1.2
4/2018	74	0.9
5/2018	63	0.8

6/2018	458	5.7
7/2018	139	1.7
8/2018	107	1.3
9/2018	146	1.8
10/2018	126	1.6
11/2018	70	0.9
12/2018	62	0.8
11/2019	81	1.0
2/2019	51	0.6
3/2019	88	1.1
4/2019	62	0.8
5/2019	135	1.7
6/2019	57	0.7
7/2019	53	0.7
8/2019	49	0.6
9/2019	69	0.9
10/2019	68	0.8
12019	71	0.9
1/12/2019	24	0.3
1/2020	39	0.5
2/2020	47	0.6
3/2020	134	1.7
4/2020	6	0.1
Total	8026	