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“Our migrant” and “the other migrant”: migration discourse in the Albanian media, 2015–2018

Elona Dhëmbo^{1,2} , Erka Çaro^{1,2} & Julia Hoxha¹

The expansion of research on migration over recent decades has neglected sending and transit countries. Whether in terms of their internal development, their diaspora policy, their shift from primarily sending countries to (potential) transit or destination countries, or the issue of return migration and reintegration into home societies – all these topics deserve further exploration. This paper seeks to redress this by examining Albania, a sending country with almost a third of its population living externally, and which is recently shifting to a transit and potential destination country. Media discourse on migration was analysed, recalling its power to reflect as well as shape public opinion. Employing a quantitative approach, media discourse on migrants from 2015 to 2018 was examined. Some 55 web-based media were identified, along with twenty TV channels, 61 TV programs, and 317 articles. A qualitative analysis was then used to detect the tone of the discourse and gain a deeper understanding of the messages conveyed. Results showed that migration from the perspective of a sending country has dominated Albanian media discourse over the monitoring period. Major identified issues include: migration and demographic challenges, migration and multiculturalism in societies receiving Albanian migrants, and asylum seeking as a recent trend in Albanian emigration often standing in the way of potential Albanian EU membership. The regional migration “crisis” and the potential of Albania becoming a transit or destination country for refugees has only gained limited attention. The binary of “our migrant” versus “the other migrant” became a key distinction.

¹University of Tirana, Tirana, Albania. ²These authors contributed equally: Elona Dhëmbo, Erka Çaro. ✉email: elona.dhembo@unitir.edu.al

Introduction

The unique power of the media—the so-called fourth estate—is a recognised mechanism for representing and shaping public opinion, understood as an aggregate of views of individuals in a society. The media frames debates, sets agendas, and provides a good source of public opinion (Eberl et al., 2018). In recent years, the rhetoric used in the media to describe migration has attracted the attention of many researchers, especially within the developed destination countries for migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (Danaj and Wagner, 2021; Triandafyllidou, 2017, 2018; Bevitori and Zotti, 2019). Similar developments have also affected Albania.

Following the fall of communism in 1990, Albania rapidly shaped a predominantly sending country profile, experiencing several “waves” of out migration (see Barjaba and Barjaba, 2015)¹, a trend which has persisted to nowadays (European Commission, 2021). These dynamics have been describes largely as intensive, irregular, and fluctuating due to the combined impact of economic and political push factors (Dhembo et al., 2019). However, the 2015 European refugee “crisis” and its aftermath shifted the position of Albania into a transition and even potential destination country. Such developments are captured in official statistics. It was only in 2018 that Albania began including asylum seekers and foreign residents in its Official Statistic, reporting in 2018 totals of 4386 asylum seekers and 9090 foreign residents (INSTAT, 2019). These figures have led to migration issues occupying more space in the Albanian media (Zguri, 2016), describing Albania both as a country of origin and a potential host country for migrants.

Despite these developments and increasing media attention to migration issues, no previous study in Albania has specifically examined media discourse on migration. Just one recent comparative study from Fengler and Kreutler (2020) included data from Albania, although on a small sample scale and only focused on two media sources. However, there are studies examining media coverage of Albanian migration in receiving countries (Nicola, 2005; Mai, 2005; Çaro and Danaj, 2015; Tsaliki, 2008). Nonetheless, the need for further research goes beyond the Albanian case. According to the IOM (2017) there is a need for more research on the media’s role in transit and origin countries. Asking how the media portrays migrants greatly assists in comprehending attitudes towards migration. Studies have confirmed that negative oriented discourse produces negative attitudes toward migrants (Eberl et al., 2018; Meltzer et al., 2017; Kosho, 2016). Furthermore, given that the discourse on migrants is mostly based on subjective meaning and rarely on facts, the dominance of emotions and prejudices contributes to the negative tone of media coverage (CNMC, 2018). Accordingly, the UNCHR (2018) has presented some guidelines to prevent misinformation and dispel myths in portraying migration.

In the case of Albania, there is a deficit in mapping and understanding media discourse on migration. This paper aims to fill that gap by: (i) exploring how migration is portrayed in the Albanian media, (ii) mapping and analysing migration coverage in the media, and (iii) drawing considerations on the potential that media frames on migration might have in (further) shaping public opinion in Albania. This is achieved from two analytical points covering 2015 to 2018: firstly, looking at Albania as an origin country, and secondly, as a transit and potential host country. The paper investigates the below questions: how is migration covered in the Albanian media, how is Albanian media discourse on migration orientated, and which frames predominate in the media discourse?

Firstly, this article will review the literature on migration, media frames on migration, and mediated political discourse.

Secondly, after explaining the methodological approach, the empirical section will present findings from an overview of articles published in daily mainstream media in Albania over 2015–2018.

Literature review

Migration coverage in the media. Media coverage on migration is influenced by various factors, including political and global developments. However, in recent decades, topics concerning migration and the portrayal of migrants have been gaining attention in the European media (Jacomella, 2010; Schemer, 2012; Caviedes, 2015; Krzyżanowski and Ruth, 2018). Factors such as EU expansion, Brexit, the Eurozone crisis, and the refugee “crisis” have encouraged the increase of media interest in migration issues and the rhetoric used to portray migration (Danaj and Wagner, 2021). Thousands of migrants, originating from countries experiencing conflict, human rights violations, and war, such as Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Iraq, arrived in Europe seeking asylum (Human Rights Watch, 2015; Krzyżanowski and Ruth, 2018). Italy, Greece, and Hungary served as the main gateways, overwhelming their asylum systems (Metcalf-Hough, 2015). European countries became divided between those prepared and unprepared to accept immigrants (Fourquet, 2015). Media coverage on migration differs from country to country, Eberl et al. (2019) noted that in Germany and Sweden in 2015, the refugee “crises” and their role as two of the main destination countries catalysed the promotion of migration issues in the media discourse in these two counties. Another study focused on a large sample of online and printed media articles in thirteen countries observed that: in developed countries such as Australia migration coverage was more focused on migrant accommodation and irregularity of intake; in Canada and the UK media coverage tended to focus more on immigration and immigrants; in the Netherlands and Norway media coverage was more focused on asylum seekers (McAuliffe et al., 2015); while the UK was an exception because media coverage reached its peak in 2016, rather than in 2015, due to the Brexit referendum.

As Triandafyllidou (2017) confirmed, media coverage tends to reflect the different migration experiences of a particular country and its context. These factors have also shaped different coverage of migration issues when comparing Western European counties with Central and Eastern ones, regardless of their EU membership status. In a recent comparative study, Fengler and Kreutler (2020) highlighted these differences when they found that media coverage in Western European countries was more focused on the situation of refugees and migrants, and the support provided to them, while media in Central and Eastern Europe was more concerned with the problems experienced with refugees and migrants, and the protests against them.

Media discourse on migration. Immigration has become a highly politicised topic in recent years (Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017). Migration coverage and migration discourse in the media are not just shaped by international and national factors, they also have the potential to define native perceptions towards migrants (Jacomella, 2010). Various studies have documented that media discourse on migrants and refugees has been mostly negative (Galantino, 2020; Arcimaviciene and Baglama, 2018; Eberl et al., 2018; Sabic and Boric, 2016). In some countries, the media has portrayed refugees primarily as people linked with crime, terrorism, and a threat to state security (Galantino, 2020; Fotopoulos and Kaimaklioti 2016; Sabic and Boric, 2016; Medianu, 2014; Esses et al., 2013). Furthermore,

migration has not only been seen as a threat to public security, but also as a threat to economic stability, as well as cultural homogeneity (Dursun et al., 2019).

When talking about migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, the media is more concerned in counting them (Fotopoulos and Kaimaklioti, 2016) than in treating them as individuals with human rights and needs (Triandafyllidou, 2017). Hate speech and racism have also been evident (Ekman, 2019). Muslim migrants in particular have suffered in a media that repeatedly portrays them as extremist, stereotyping and presenting Muslim women as victims of oppression (Dursun et al., 2019; Triandafyllidou, 2017). Media portrayals of immigrants and refugees as terrorists or criminals serve to dehumanise those so described (Medianu, 2014). According to Krzyżanowski and Ruth, (2018) describing these migration flows as a “crisis” is strongly ideologically charged and increases the stigma on migrants while legitimising increased barriers and repressive measures. Taken together, this gives coverage of migration a mostly negative tone.

This negative tone is not contained within the borders of a country (Eberl et al., 2018). Although countries like Albania (i.e., predominantly sending ones) have only recently been shifting towards transit and potentially host countries, their public opinion and local media have been exposed to the negative media discourse on immigrants before this. For example, Albanians in Albania have been continuously exposed to such media coverage (especially via Italian media outlets) due to a combination of interest in how Albanian migrants were portrayed in receiving countries, as well as due to accessibility (a good percentage of the Albanian population in the post-’90s gained a good command of Italian language²). This exposure has the potential to influence both public opinion and media discourse.

Analysing newspaper articles in the Italian media from 1992 to 2009, Montali et al. (2013) noted that migrants are portrayed mostly in terms of fear and threats. Immigrants from non-EU countries are more often linked with crime, prostitution, street violence, and described with pejorative terms like “gang”. Amores et al. (2020) focused on media portrayals of migrants by analysing photographs in three countries: Italy, Greece, and Spain. They observed that, since the so-called European migrant “crisis” of 2015, there has been an increase in negative framing. These developments coincide with a growing interest in Albania regarding immigration issues due to local developments such as growing numbers of migrants transiting through Albania (Xhaho and Tandili, 2019; CMD, 2020). The section below examines the main media frames on migration.

Media frames on migration. Research has explored how migration issues are framed in the media. This is important because media frames are subject to social forces whose dominance affects the public discourse on a given topic (Yantseva, 2020). As described by Allen et al. (2017), migration coverage is not only interesting in exploring positive or negative attitudes, but also helps by presenting a variety of different issues, narratives, and viewpoints in various contexts (p. 4). It is these narratives that may help in understanding and revealing more clearly the orientation of public discourse, as well as provide a deeper understanding of the hidden reasons for the positive or negative nuances of the discourse in specific contexts.

Security and threat is one of the main media frames discussed in the literature and trends in a variety of forms. Various studies have documented how migration is seen as a threat to public security (Galantino, 2020; Fotopoulos and Kaimaklioti, 2016; Kovář, 2019; Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Lawlor et al.,

2017; Sabic and Boric, 2016; Medianu, 2014). This frame describes how the media associate incoming populations with illegality, terrorism, and crime (Bennett et al., 2013; El Refaie, 2001; Goodman and Speer, 2007; Ibrahim, 2005). However, threat is not merely perceived in terms of public security and crime. Lorella and Musolff (2019) noted that the media often focuses on the impact of migration on the cultural identity of host countries, where incoming populations are perceived as a threat by the local population.

Another important frame discussed in the literature is the “*economic and the labour migration frame*”, which includes perceived threats to the economy and welfare. Migrants are considered a financial burden and a concern in terms of economic stability (Eberl et al., 2018; Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Esses et al., 2013). Esses et al. (2013) discovered that attitudes toward migrants are negative when they are perceived as competitors in the labour market for economic resources. Threats are also perceived in terms of welfare security where migrants are seen as “welfare scroungers” (Soroka et al., 2016) draining public resources from members of the host society (Hier and Greenberg, 2002; Madra and Adaman, 2014; Quinsaat, 2014). This is more typical in developed economies and destination counties, as confirmed by Berry et al. (2016) for Spain, the UK, and Germany, where frames on cultural threat and welfare security were more prevalent.

The welfare frame has been mostly operationalized in relation to education, health care, pensions, retirement, unemployment support, and housing (Heidenreich et al., 2019). Heidenreich et al. (2019) identified the welfare frame to be among the most salient frames in the media discourse. Berry et al. (2016) noted that in the British press, the welfare frame and concern around access to public health services was more prevalent compared to countries such as Sweden, Germany, Italy, and Spain.

These various concerns around supposed threats posed by migrants to destination counties also manifest in the use of terminology that describe refugees and migrants in terms of *natural disasters* including “waves” and “floods” (Arcimaviciene and Baglama, 2018; IOM, 2017; Ferreira et al., 2017). This might lead to greater perceptions of threat and increased fear among local populations. According to Arcimaviciene and Baglama, (2018) the use of frames related to natural disasters can create a sense of fear, insecurity, and panic.

Victimisation is yet another negative portrayal of migrants often dominating the media discourse on migration (Amores et al., 2020; Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017). In their study on Southern Europe, Amores et al. (2020) noted that the most prominent visual image representing migrants was that of victimisation. In another study, Fotopoulos and Kaimaklioti (2016), looking at the media discourse on the refugee “crisis” in Greece, Germany, and the UK, found that refugees from Syria were often described as desperate and helpless victims. Similarly, Bosilkov and Drakaki (2018) observed that the victimisation frame mostly portrays migrants as helpless.

Studies focusing on transit or gate counties have been scarcer; however, a more mixed picture appears where such observations exist. Sabic and Boris (2016) looked at the media discourse in the Western Balkans. They covered North Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia – in the position of gate countries for refugees—and observed that in two counties, North Macedonia and Slovenia, the media discourse was negative and focused on security issues, threats to stability, and the fear of terrorism. However, the situation was somehow different in Serbia and Croatia, where the media discourse was found to be more of a mix between empathy for the problems that refugees face and issues of stability (Sabic and Boric, 2016).

Data and methodology

This paper builds on data generated from monitoring 55 Albanian online media sources (comprising the websites of fifteen newspapers and eight magazines) with a total of 317 articles, as well as twenty TV channels with a total of 61 TV programs, over a 4-year period from 1 January 2015 to 31 December 2018. A quantitative and qualitative mixed data analysis was employed to systematically document and compare references to migration in media articles and reports.

The monitoring of the migration discourse in the media includes the systematic and continuous analysis of the media content to document, compare and analyse quantitatively and qualitatively the discourse related to migrant issues. In the primary quantitative phase, newsletters, magazines, and online media articles relating to migration were identified using the following keywords: migration, (e)migrants, asylum seeker, refugee, return migrant, and diaspora, further enriched with additional keywords such as immigration, remittances, and repatriation.

The qualitative analysis that followed, consisted in coding the discourse content (preserving the original language) in MAXqda 2020. For this, under each keyword we identified synonyms and relevant combination of phrases, given the reach phonetics of Albanian language, and created coding families and identification of media items by the tonality of the content such as positive, negative or neutral. Frames identified via literature review led informed the process of coding and categorisation of tonalities. The smallest examined unit was an article or post, all originally in Albanian language.

The main pillars of the data analysis were: (a) the volume of the media coverage on migration; (b) the incidence of common codes, themes, and frames; and (c) the employed tone. Literature review was used to identify predominant media frames in the area of migration, which led and structured the process of the data analysis and reporting on themes and frames.

Several challenges that may have influenced the analysis included issues of duplication. Often news is replicated and published in different media outlets under (slightly) different titles. Difficulties were faced in accessing online media archives, which are often poorly structured and rarely updated. Often information is missing after a return visit to a particular archive, a specific issue in retrieving items for 2015. Extra data cleaning efforts were made. It was sometimes noted that unrelated articles appeared when using relevant keywords. Furthermore, some outlets were a jumble of disorganised information, making it very difficult to pinpoint the exact information required.

Findings and discussion

Coverage of migration issues in the Albanian media, 2015–2018. Since the 2015 refugee “crisis”—and similar to other European and Balkan countries—there has been a steady rise in Albanian media coverage on migration. Based on the official data in Albania, the period between 2015 and 2018 was characterised by irregular migratory movements to the EU, as well as asylum seeking for economic reasons (CMD, 2020). With a lag relating to the 2015 migration “crisis”, the increase of articles related to migration issues was more noticeable during 2017–2018 (Fig. 1). Problems with accessing older articles may have influenced this outcome. However, another plausible reason might be the irregular arrival of immigrants. Rates of irregular migrants entering Albania in 2018 were five times higher than in 2017, and this might have caused increased media interest (Xhaho and Tandili, 2019).

2015 was the least intensive period. The main topics dominating Albanian media discourse on migration included:

Fig. 1 Total Incidence of Migration-related Keywords in Albanian Media, 2015–2018. (Number of media items (y) per year (x)).

Fig. 2 Illustration of “our migrant” in Albanian media. “Increase of Albanian asylum seekers bothers Holland” <https://www.reporter.al/shtimi-iazilkerkuesve-shqiptare-shqeteson-holanden/>.

migration and multiculturalism; return migration (particularly, economic reintegration and school integration for children of returned families); migration and demographic challenges; refugee “crisis”; migration and EU countries (policies, experiences, permit acquisition etc.); and asylum seeking (concerns and how to access employment opportunities abroad). These topics are consistent with the main concerns related to “our migrants” – referring to out migration, the asylum seeking of Albanian migrants in EU countries and the return of Albanian migrants (primarily from Greece and Italy) (see Vathi and Zajmi, 2017). Although 2015 was the year Europe was faced with the refugee “crisis”, this tide had not yet reached Albania.

In 2016, increased media attention on migration was observed, as well as the emergence of the refugee “crisis”, and concerns around Albania as a destination country for asylum seekers from the East. This shifted some focus onto “the other migrants”, an emerging topic alongside ongoing issues including Albanian asylum seekers and camp safety in European destination countries. The first discrepancies became visible in media focus on “our migrants” in terms of security and safety versus concern on “the other migrants” with Albania becoming a potential destination country for asylum seekers (see Figs. 2 and 3).

Fig. 3 Illustration of “other migrants” in Albanian media. “Kapshticë, 16 Syrian refugees caught, including 8 children and a 2 month old baby” <https://www.topalbaniaradio.com/v7/kapshtice-kapen-16-refugjate-siriane-mes-tyre-8-femije-e-foshnja-dymuajshe/>.

Fig. 4 Return migration in Albanian media. “Emigration, are Albanians coming back?” <https://www.syri.net/web-tv/81985/emigracioni-a-porikthehen-shqiptaret/>.

These trends continued into 2017, however, a larger topic of concern in the Albania media were problems associated with the lack of success in processing Albanian asylum seekers by EU countries and the (potential) influx of return migrants (failed asylum seekers) as shown in the example in Fig. 4.

2018 was the most intensive year for Albanian media coverage on migration. Issues regarding Albanian asylum seekers in EU countries continued, with rising concerns around unaccompanied minors, as well the policy agenda and developments in Germany (the then main destination country for Albanian migrants) and other EU countries. The increased media coverage on migration during 2018 was also related to the Albanian diaspora and the political debate on the right to vote, remittances, and the impact of outgoing migration on Albania’s demographics and economy. The following samples help to illustrate this: “*The hope road passes though Albania... INSTAT Report: Number of asylum seekers in the*

country goes up” (<http://www.panorama.com.al/rrug-e-shpreses-ka-lon-nga-shqiperia-raporti-i-instat-rritet-numri-i-azilkerkuesve-ne-vend/>); “*The figure is out: Billions brought by emigrants into the Albanian economy*” (<http://www.panorama.com.al/del-shifra-miliardat-qe-sollen-emigrantet-ne-ekonomine-shqiptare/>); “*Albania, the largest exporter of minors seeking asylum in Europe*” (<http://www.panorama.com.al/shqiperia-eksportuesi-me-i-madh-i-te-miturve-azilkerkues-nga-europa/>); and “*Migration crisis in Europe: could it lead to the end of the EU?*” (<https://tvklan.al/kriza-e-emigracionit-ne-evrope-a-mund-te-sjelle-fundin-e-be-se/>).

Examining the terms used by the Albanian media to describe migration, this paper identified the most frequent label to be “emigrant”, followed by “refugee”. In comparison, Berry et al. (2016) found that the most frequent label in Germany and Sweden was “refugee” and “asylum seeker”; in Italy and the UK the most frequent term was “migrant”, followed by refugee, while in Spain the media preferred the term “immigrant” and less often the term “refugee”. Regarding the use of “refugee”, Albania does not differ overly from other countries, while “emigrant” does not seem to be dominant in these other countries. It should be noted that emigration is mainly a sensitive issue in developing countries (such as Albania) rather than in developed countries, since “emigration rates tend to reflect a country’s level of development” (OECD, 2017).

These findings confirm the relevance of internal, country specific developments. In Albania, the issue of emigration remains a sensitive topic. Indeed, Albania’s levels of emigration reached the highest in Europe, being 5–6 times higher than the average level of other developing countries of origin. In 2015, Albania ranked 8th among 25 countries, with the highest emigration rates among the tertiary educated. In 2017, around 58,853 Albanians gained citizenship in Italy and Greece (Eurostat, 2019). Furthermore, thousands of Albanians continued to seek asylum in developed countries. In 2018, more than a third of asylum applications from enlargement countries were from Albania (Eurostat, 2020), with applications increasing by 38% compared to 2008 (Eurostat, 2019). This evidence substantiates this paper’s description of bias within Albanian media coverage, which favours emigration and “our migrants” over immigrants and refugees or “the other migrants”.

Examining the most frequent terms in the investigated period, this paper observed no significant differences in the use of the terms “emigrant” and “refugee” in 2015 and 2016. The use of “refugee” in 2015 slightly exceeded the use of “emigrant”, while in 2016 the term “emigrant” was marginally more frequent. The 2015 refugee “crisis” in Europe might explain these observations in Albanian media coverage of migration. However, 2017 and 2018 were characterised by a boost in the use of “emigrants”. In 2017, the use of “emigrant” was more than double the use of “refugee”. Again, rising national concerns around high levels of out migration seem to have shaped these trends in the coverage.

Inside the Albanian media discourse on migration. This data analysis of Albanian media discourse on migration between 2015 and 2018 showed a predominantly negative oriented discourse, with less positive or neutral tones. The negative orientation particularly increased in the latter years of the investigated period (Fig. 5). A rising trend of negative media discourse on migration in the latter years is also observed in the literature on other European countries (see Amores et al., 2020; Galantino, 2020; Abalu, 2017; Sabic and Boric, 2016). The negatively toned discourse was primarily related to “asylum seekers” and “refugees”. This is similar to findings on the use of negative discourse against groups of asylum seekers and refugees documented by Yantseva (2020). In an earlier study, Klocker and Dunn (2003) noted that,

among asylum seekers and refugees, the media discourse was more positive towards refugees due to their legal status, but, despite that, the representation of refugees as desperate, miserable, oppressed, and persecuted was still evident. In this analysis, it appears that the asylum seekers and refugees were mostly represented in the media as a group desperately seeking help from host countries. The negative media discourse raises concerns as it reflects negative attitudes towards migrants in Albania as a primarily sending country, less experienced with migrant influx. Albania continues to be a transit country for many emigrants. The official data for 2020 showed a number of 2232 asylum seekers mostly originating from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Morocco (INSTAT, 2020). New developments such as the arrival of hundreds of Afghan refugees after Taliban took control of Afghanistan (Voice of America, 2021) are likely to boost the relevance of this type of discourse to Albanian media and public opinion.

Whenever present, positive discourse was mainly associated with “our migrants” who have successfully integrated within host societies and shared their success stories in the media. Presenting migrant success stories is seen as a means to balance media coverage, which is usually dominated by a negatively toned discourse (IOM, 2017; Grobet, 2014). For the rest of the media discourse, use of names and individualised description is almost absent. Migrants are often described as an “influx” or as “groups”. These are just two examples of titles used to illustrate this last tendency: “Greece launches the second group of migrants to Turkey” or “Albania risks an influx of African refugees”.

A negative orientated discourse is also seen in the linking of migration with fear and concerns. For example, one headline warns of the imminence of refugees arriving in Albania: “Syrian refugees are only 12 kilometres away from Albania”. The negative orientated discourse is starker when portraying migrants from Muslim countries. A negative orientated discourse invoking fear towards Muslims was more notable in 2016. For example, articles with titles such as “Slovakian Prime Minister wins re-election with the cause: no Muslims in the country”, or “Germany on alert, Islamists are recruiting refugees”, or “Muslim immigrants throw Christians into the sea” link Muslims with security threats and even terrorism.

The negative discourse towards Muslim migrants is also documented in the literature. Sinani (2017) underlined the bias of negative news related to Muslims and explained that the Berlin terrorist attack of 2016 significantly affected the negative orientated discourse in the Albanian media. This might explain why 2016 saw an increase in negative orientated discourse in media articles mentioning Muslims. Islamophobic news reporting by the press has been well documented in other studies (Economou, 2019; Dursun, et al., 2019; Triandafyllidou, 2017; Ahmed and Matthes, 2016).

A negatively toned discourse also predominates in the linking of migration with crime, fear, and stability concerns. “Calabria, 9 Albanian mobsters arrested” or “Tragic weeks with immigrants, slaughter and murder between them” are examples of media content targeting migration and crime. Analysing the Albanian media discourse on migration, this study found no difference in how migration and crime links are portrayed for “our migrants” versus “other migrants”. The link of migration with crime is evident both for Albanian emigrants as well as for “other migrants” in Albania or other countries. However, a difference can be observed in the outcomes of such coverage. When covering issues on migration and crime among “our migrants” there is an emphasis on the impact that such links may generate among media consumers on the image of Albania and Albanian migrants abroad. This could manifest as a negative sensitivity such as feeling ashamed of their country, while the link of the

Fig. 5 Most Frequent Terms in Albanian Media Coverage of Migration, 2015–2018. Number of media items (y) per year (x).

“other migrants” with crime can produce xenophobic feelings and racism (Fig. 5).

A more neutral oriented discourse was encountered when media covered foreign policy, procedures, and regulations regarding migration. As shown in Fig. 6, neutral discourse increased during 2017 and 2018, surpassing positive discourse. Indeed, over these 2 years, a larger interest was shown in covering developments of foreign political issues, regulations, and migration procedures such as in the following examples: “Policies of the new Italian government on migration, flat taxation, the Euro, debt” (<https://www.balkanweb.com/site/politikat-e-qeverise-se-re-italiane-per-emigrantet-taksen-e-sheshte-euron-borxhin/>) and “A draft law on limiting legal emigration” (<https://www.zeriamerikes.com/a/3969671.html>).

Media frames on migration, in Albania, 2015–2018. The frames shaping Albanian media discourse on migration between 2015 and 2018 correspond with internationally salient media frames on migration (some examples are provided below in Figs. 7–9). They include security, economic, social, and political frames (see for example Yantseva, 2020). However, the dominance of one over the other seems to vary by year.

The security frame. An important frame in the Albanian media discourse, the security frame has been prominent in linking migration with crime (Figs. 8 and 9). The discourse often implicates migrants in murder, rape, fighting, terrorism, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and robbery. A difference can be identified in the way that “our migrants” are compared to the “other migrants”. The discourse on Albanian emigrants to EU countries has focused on the association by their hosts with drug trafficking, human trafficking, and murder. The following titles are illustrative: “Albanian immigrants in Italy part of the drug smuggling network” or “Four Albanians are arrested, they trafficked 20 emigrants per week from Albania to Britain”.

Refugees and asylum seekers have been associated in the media with terrorism, rape, sexual abuse, and theft. Some examples include: “Refugee rapists must leave the country”; “Rapes by Syrian asylum seekers”, or “Refugees, the ‘Trojan horse’ for terrorism.” According to Eberl et al. (2018), threats to security have been particularly influential in shaping attitudes towards immigrants and may even escalate stereotyping. The way immigrants are seen in a society is decisive for their integration. Sabic and Boric (2016) found rising concerns around threats to security in non-traditional host countries on the Balkan route, such as Croatia and North Macedonia. This is relevant to recent developments in Albania, which has changed from a predominantly sending country, to a transit country, and even a host country, particularly after 2015 (Dhëmbo, 2020).

The economic frame. Similar to the other countries discussed above, economic issues are an important part of the media discourse in Albania on migration (Yantseva, 2020). Two sub-themes emerge—one focuses on migration as an opportunity

Fig. 6 Trends of Albanian Media Discourse Orientation, 2015–2018. Number of media items (y) per year (x).

Fillore > -Greqi

Studimi/ Si po e shpëtojnë emigrantët shqiptarë Athinën nga kriza (Video)

19 Mars, 2017 07:43

Madhësia e tekstit: - +

Në kulmin e krizës ekonomike që ka pllakosur vendin, janë emigrantët shqiptarë që jetojnë në Greqi, ata që kanë shpëtuar nga kolapsi total tregun imobiliar.

Fig. 7 Illustration of the economic frame. Research/How are Albanian emigrants saving Athens from the crisis? (Video) <https://www.balkanweb.com/site/studimi-si-po-e-shpetojne-emigrantet-shqiptare-athinen-nga-kriza/>.

Kryeministri hungarez i konsideron refugjatët si pushtues myslimanë

MADHËSIA E TEKSTIT: - +

PERISKOP.COM | 9 JANAR 2018, 10:39 | LAJMI

Kryeministri i Hungarisë, Viktor Orbán, e përshkroi valën e emigracionit në Evropë si një pushtim

Në një intervistë për gazetën gjermane "Bild" të hënën ai thaj: "Në nuk i konsiderojmë këta njerëz si refugjatë myslimanë. Ne i konsiderojmë ata si pushtues myslimanë". Për të arritur nga Siria në Hungari, ata duhet të kalojnë katër vende. Njerëzit nuk po "luftojnë për jetën e tyre", por "kërkojnë një jetë më të mirë".

Refugjatët duhet të kishin kërkuar pranimin e tyre paraprakisht, por në vend të kësaj ata kishin shkelur

Fig. 8 Illustration of the security and political frames. "Hungarian Prime Minister considers refugees as Muslim invaders" <https://www.periskopi.com/kryeministri-hungarez-konsideron-refugjatet-si-pushtues-myslimane/>.

Qyteti italian, Firence është tronditur nga protestat e dhunshme të kryera nga emigrantët afrikanë.

Trazirat janë provokuar pas vrasjes së një shitësi të rrugës nga Senegali, transmeton portali arbresh.info

Rreth 300 persona, kryesisht nga Senegali, kanë organizuar një protestë në qendër të qytetit.

Protestuesit i bënë thirrje kryetarit të bashkisë Diego Nardella që të dilte tek ata dhe të bisedonte me ta.

Edhe pse Nardella pranoi ftesën e tyre, sjellja agresive e disa protestuesve nxiti trazita në qytetet mes tyre dhe ekstremistëve të ekstremit të djathtë.

Italia është përfshirë nga trazira anti-emigracion gjatë muajve të fundit.

Në shkurt, një simpatizant neo-nazite ka hapur zjarr mbi emigrantët afrikanë në qytetin e Macerates, në Italinë qendrore, duke lënë të plagosur gjashtë persona. arbresh.info/

Fig. 9 Illustration of the security frame. "African immigrants protesting violently in Italy" <http://www.arbresh.info/bota/emigrantet-afrikaneprotestojne-dhunshem-ne-itali/>.

for economic development, while the other deals with migration as a threat to a country's economy. Remittances from Albanian emigrants have been key to the Albanian economy and national wellbeing (Dhembo et al., 2019) and are described positively in the media for their important economic contribution (Fig. 7). Contrariwise, refugees and asylum seekers, whether from Albania or from elsewhere, are portrayed as an economic burden on host countries. One example: "Germany 'opens the bag': 93.6 billion Euros for refugees". Similarly Eberl (2018) described economic frames from two perspectives; a negative one considering migration as an economic burden for host countries, and a positive one considering migration as economically beneficial for host countries and a source of remittances for origin countries.

The social and demographic frames. Demographic issues prominent in the discourse include the risk of population aging due to emigration, falling birth rates, and changes in social structures. Headlines include: "Albania is aging rapidly"; "Frightening figures since 1990: Albania is disappearing, the natural increase is heading towards zero"; or "80% of Albanian asylum seekers are under 35 years old". Such alarmist media items negatively frame migration and future prospects for the country. Social frames highlight problems related to the education of refugee children, refugee integration, and the emigration of qualified persons, with headlines including: "Millions of refugee children are deprived of education".

Fig. 10 Media Frames on Migration, Albania 2015–2018. Number of media frames (y) per year (x).

The political frame. Political issues, especially foreign policies, procedures, and rules in relation to migration, have been the fourth dominant frame in the Albanian media discourse on migration. Internal policies have also received recent attention. Figure 10 shows the main framework distribution by year.

As seen above, the security frame reached its peak in 2016. This frame saw a slight decline in 2017, rising again in 2018, although not to the levels seen in 2016. The political frame shows a steadily increasing trend. In 2017 and 2018, the political frame dominated the discourse versus all other frames. The economic frame reached prominence in the media discourse in 2017, when Albania saw an increase in economically critical remittances. The socio-demographic framework also increased, particularly from 2017 to 2018, when new waves of out migration caused concern about their effect on Albania's population and demographic prospects. Overall, continued Albanian emigration and the increased number of asylum seekers from Albania to more developed countries (mainly in Europe) fuelled concern within socio-demographic media frames.

Concluding notes

Media discourse employs different frames and is an important agent both informing and shaping public opinion and behaviour, political discourse, and policy (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). This is especially true when it comes to complex social and political issues such as the economic and refugee crises (Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017). This study aimed to shed light on the most dominant frames in the Albanian media on migration, refugees, and asylum over 2015–2018. Migration has been a major concern for Albanian society in recent decades, following the end of communism in 1990. The media discourse in Albania on migration has been primarily concerned with Albania as a sending country, the role of remittances, the brain drain, and the fates of “our migrants” in destination countries.

There has been less focus on return migration. However, international, regional, and local developments following the 2015 European refugee “crisis” also influenced Albanian media coverage on migration. Salient themes on migration in the more developed European countries emerged in the Albanian media. The slow but increasingly evident shift of Albania from sending country to a transit and potentially host country raised new issues in media reports alongside traditional concerns. Nevertheless, media coverage of migration over 2015–2018 did not simply reflect new developments, but also shaped opinions and attitudes. Significant themes included the prevailing negative tone of the media coverage, the security frame dominated by threats, and the binary division between “our migrants” and “other migrants” in the coverage of migration and crime, migration and economic development, and migration and socio-demographic impact. These themes demonstrate how the discourse on migration is fragile and can easily change tone depending on “who” is the

migrant, independent of the context and history of the location where particular events are occurring.

This study had some limitations. The analysis had a descriptive character and did not go further into establishing connections between identified trends in the media discourse and more specific socio-cultural, political, or historical developments or context of the data. Furthermore, the main frames in the media coverage were defined based on a quantitative analysis of the most frequently used words in the dataset. Further research applying more qualitative methods is necessary to go deeper into exploring the tonality and nuances of the discourse and gain deeper insights from different media forms as well as the stages when events occur. Despite these limitations, this study provided valuable insights into how the Albanian media has described and structured the issue of migration during the years of economic and refugee “crises” in Europe.

The more recent developments, which go beyond the timeline covered in this paper, call for further research. On one hand, interest on Albania as a sending country continues to persist. Despite the fact that Covid-19 pandemic led to a decrease of out migration and the number of applications by Albanian asylum seekers to EU countries in 2020 decreased by 66% as compared to 2019, compared to the other sending countries, Albania had a much smaller decrease (European Commission, 2021). On the other hand, a significant increase in the numbers of incoming migrants in the country (primarily from the Middle East and Afghanistan), a growing interest of international organisations such as UNHCR and ILO implementing in Albania project for more employment opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers (IOM, 2021), and a more pro-active role of the Albanian government in improving the legal framework and harmonising it with the EU *aquis*³ in this respect, have all the potential to influence the media discourse and public opinion perceptions on migration issues and produce interesting setting for comparative research across time.

Data availability

The datasets used and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding authors on reasonable request.

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Notes

¹ During the communist period emigration was considered illegal and punishable, media was censored, and the sporadic cases of emigration were treated as escapes and national treason. In the first decade of the post-communist era, Albania experienced what has been labelled as three main periods of emigration (Barjaba & Barjaba, 2015). According to the authors, the first started in 1990 when thousands of Albanians sought refuge through foreign embassies. The second occurred in 1991 with the main destination being southern Italy. Thousands of Albanians crossed the Adriatic Sea

- pouring into Italian Adriatic ports. The last “wave” of migration took place in 1997, fuelled by the collapse of the pyramid saving scheme.
- 2 The Italian language is the most popular foreign language spoken in Albania. (See for instance, <https://ntlinternational.com/blog/2019/10/23/what-languages-are-spoken-in-albania/>)
 - 3 One example being the new Law No. 10/2021 “On Asylum in The Republic of Albania”.

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Author contributions

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This study was conducted in compliance with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (2010/C 83/02), the European Union European Charter for Researchers, and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Informed consent

All interviewees in the study gave their informed consent to participate.

Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Elona Dhëmbu.

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