**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# Who is to blame? Stories of European Union migration governance in Italian, Maltese, and Spanish newspapers

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**Abstract**

While scholars have investigated how media frame human mobility and securitize irregular border crossings, little research has been dedicated to how European Union (EU) actors are portrayed in media coverage of migration across the Mediterranean. By integrating framing into narrative analysis through the Narrative Policy Framework, our article fills this gap. Specifically, we provide a content analysis of Italian, Maltese, and Spanish newspapers and identify the key narratives underlying the portrayal of specific EU actors. We show that, overall, lack of EU solidarity is the prevalent issue in Italian, Maltese, and Spanish newspapers alike, followed by the alleged inefficiency of EU actors. Accordingly, the EU and its key actors are regularly narrated as either villains, responsible for the crisis and deserting member states in need of solidarity, or as weaklings unable to take effective action. These narratives appear remarkably consistent across countries, over time, and newspapers with different ideological orientation.

**KEYWORDS**
European Union, framing, media, migration, Narrative Policy Framework

# 1 | INTRODUCTION

European states' politicians have often scapegoated the European Union (EU) and its member states[1] for unpopular decision making. As a heated and heavily politicized issue that has been widely portrayed as a "crisis," irregular migration is no exception. Soaring irregular flows across the Mediterranean Sea have severely affected support for the EU, often blamed as unable to enforce its external borders and ensuring solidarity by redistributing asylum seekers across member states. As a result, the so-called "migration crisis" marked a turning point in European integration, fueling Euroscepticism (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016). The failure to integrate the enforcement of EU external borders and reform its asylum system prompted especially strong grievances among Southern European member states (Ringlerova, 2022), which frequently lamented the lack of EU-wide burden-sharing in EU migration governance. The refrain that "Europe left us alone," for instance, has become commonplace across the Italian political spectrum (Terlizzi, 2021) as well as in European Parliament's debates on EU asylum policy (Kaufmann, 2021).

Migration and security studies scholars have extensively examined the pivotal role of discourses, frames, and narratives in enabling and legitimizing specific migration and border enforcement policies. Irregular migration to Europe has obtained especially detailed attention (e.g., Ceccorulli et al., 2021; Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017). EU integration scholars, on the other hand, have conducted several studies of the politics of blame within the EU, highlighting the existence of "multilevel blame games" and scapegoating dynamics between decision makers operating at the national and at the EU level in various policy areas, including border enforcement and asylum policy (Heinkelmann-Wild & Zangl, 2020). These bodies of scholarship, however, have rarely interacted. As a result, while extensive research has been dedicated to blame games, narratives of migration to Europe and EU migration governance, we know relatively little about how European institutions, member states, and leaders are portrayed by media in their coverage of irregular migration. Understanding this portrayal is particularly crucial in light of the increasingly central role of media in shaping public opinion, policy discussions, and societal attitudes toward irregular migration. Despite the acknowledged influence of media on agenda setting and public attitudes to migration, there remains a lack of studies providing a granular understanding of how European actors are portrayed in media coverage of irregular mobility to Europe. Therefore, our study seeks to address this gap and shed light on the vital interplay between media discourse, migration, and the perceived role of the EU. In particular, we ask: How do media portray actors and institutions in charge of formulating and implementing European migration and border enforcement policies? Are there differences across countries, over time, and between media outlets, and if so why?

By integrating framing into narrative analysis, we provide a systematic content analysis of Italian, Maltese, and Spanish newspapers and identify the key narratives underlying the portrayal of specific European actors and institutions in Southern European media coverage of migration. We show that, overall, unsolidarity is the prevalent frame in Italian, Maltese, and Spanish newspapers alike, followed by the alleged inefficiency of European actors and institutions. Accordingly, the EU, its institutions, its agencies, and its member states are regularly portrayed as either villains, who contributed to creating the migration "crisis" and desert member states facing large-scale irregular flows, or weaklings who are unable to take effective action in the field of migration governance.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the scholarship on migration narratives, EU integration, and the politics of blame, thereby highlighting our contribution

thereto. Section 3 presents our theoretical framework and research hypotheses, while Section 4 illustrates the research design, data, and methods. In Section 5, we present our findings. Finally, Sections 6 and 7 discuss the results and provide some conclusions.

# 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW: MIGRATION TO EUROPE, NARRATIVES, AND THE POLITICS OF BLAME

Due to its visibility and humanitarian implications, migration across the Mediterranean is a newsworthy border spectacle (De Genova, 2013). Scholars have examined the key role of humanitarian narratives in strengthening restrictive approaches to border enforcement, underlying how the need to protect migrants often serves as a rhetorical device used to legitimize tighter border control governance (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Korkut et al., 2020; Terlizzi, 2021). Humanitarian and securitizing discourses are therefore inextricably linked (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Moreno-Lax, 2018).

Similarly, institutionalist migration scholars have examined the key role of migration narratives in shaping policy (Boswell et al., 2011). Recent research on migration to Europe, for instance, has highlighted the pivotal role of "pseudo-causal narratives," like the notion that sea rescue operations are a pull factor of irregular migration to tighten visa regimes, relinquish humanitarian assistance at European maritime borders, and criminalize nongovernmental organizations (Cusumano & Villa, 2021; Zaun & Nantermoz, 2022). Most of this research, however, has focused on the analysis of official documents and decision makers' speeches rather than media reporting (Terlizzi, 2021).

Moreover, most research to date has focused on how politicians and media portray the targets of border enforcement policies, namely people on the move. A large body of research has also focused on the transformation of such representations and the volatility of discourses on refugees (Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018) shedding light on the discursive frames stigmatizing refugees. Unsurprisingly, securitization and migration scholars alike have extensively examined how media portray asylum seekers in different countries (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Dahlgren, 2016; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017; Kluknavská et al., 2021), highlighting the complementarity of threat and vulnerability discourses (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017) and the connection between media coverage and anti-immigration sentiments (Damstra et al., 2021; Meltzer et al., 2017). Others have focused on the discourses surrounding human smugglers and the fight against those aiding illegal immigration (Perkowski & Squire, 2019). Recent research has also examined the discursive criminalization of other actors that have been increasingly stigmatized as facilitating irregular migration, such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (Cusumano & Bell, 2021).

While the literature on public attitude to migration has shown that exposure to information about the negative consequences of immigration leads to more negative attitudes towards the EU (Hobolt & de Vries, 2016; Ringlerova, 2022), the connection between these processes and how European migration governance is portrayed by national media remains almost unexplored. Media coverage of EU institutions has been touched upon, for example, in relation to the debate on solidarity. Research on solidarity brings us closer to understanding whether and how solidarity contestation in the context of the migration crisis developed in the news media of some European national contexts (Brändle et al., 2019; Wallaschek, 2020). Little in-depth research, however, has been dedicated to how media specifically portray each of the institutions and agencies in charge of discussing, making, and implementing European

migration and border enforcement policies. Our analysis of how Southern European media portray European actors in their coverage of irregular migration provides a first step in that direction.

Furthermore, there is another aspect of media portrayal of migration that is only partially investigated, which is the dimension of blame. Theory and scholarship on blame have been developing since the 1980s in the context of both "normal" and "extraordinary" times (Elliott, 2009; Hinterleitner et al., 2023). The process of determining who is responsible for what went wrong is what the scholarship commonly refers to as blame game. Recent studies have highlighted how the media, the public, and other nonelite actors (the blame-generators) tend to rapidly search for a culprit (Stone, 2012; Weaver, 2018) and how this affects accountability, since attributing responsibility for sharing information on one's mistakes can potentially lead to calls for resignation (Brändström, 2016; Resodihardjo, 2020). While blame games are powerful tools, which can empower particular actors, create political alliances, or challenge institutions' social order (Stone, 2012), the literature on the subject has mainly focused on blame-avoidance dynamics among power holders, examining how decision makers tend to shift or disperse blame (Hansson, 2018; Hood, 2011; Resodihardjo et al., 2016). Only few recent studies have addressed the creation of blame narratives and the role of nonelite blame-makers, focusing for example on the strategies of blame-generators and the democratic implications of blame games (Johannesson & Weinryb, 2021). The connection between blame games and policy choices has also been highlighted. Studies stress how attributing blame for policy failures can be politically costly for officeholders and cause them to make policy changes to avoid the risk of losing public support (Hansson, 2015; Hinterleitner, 2020; Hood, 2011; Weaver, 2018). Research on European blame games has shown that politicians tend to attribute blame to actors operating at a different level (either upwards to supranational institutions or downwards to lower levels government), highlighting the tendency to shift blame onto Brussels when things go wrong (Heinkelmann-Wild & Zangl, 2020; Hinterleitner et al., 2023). Little to no research, however, has addressed the subject of blame in media representation of European actors and institutions. Therefore, our analysis of how Southern European media portray European actors and institutions in their coverage of irregular migration also contributes to the debate on blame games, their drivers, and their implications.

## 3 | THEORY: INTEGRATING FRAMING INTO NARRATIVE ANALYSIS THROUGH THE NARRATIVE POLICY FRAMEWORK

Media play a crucial role in shaping public policy. First, they contribute to agenda setting by carefully choosing salient issues to bring to the attention of both the public and policy-makers. Second, by presenting policy matters in a manner that gives them understandable meaning, media construct discourses about policy realities (Crow & Lawlor, 2016). The scholarship examining media contents as well as politicians' speeches, political party programs, and discourses at large has employed a gamut of different conceptual tools. While a large tradition of studies has employed the concept of frame (Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987), research in policy studies, including migration policy, has leveraged the concept of narrative (Boswell et al., 2011; D'Amato & Lucarelli, 2019; Terlizzi, 2021), seen as better equipped at connecting the role of different actors into a plausible explanation of specific events. Frame and narrative are both concepts related to meaning-making (Shanahan et al., 2018) and are often

used interchangeably. However, narratives are less abstract constructs than frames. As elucidated by Crow and Lawlor (2016, p. 478), "while framing [...] focuses on the broad categories, segments, or angles through which a story can be told, narrative construction involves decisions by storytellers that determine the specific characters, plot, [and] causal implications." It is therefore essential to clarify that, whereas framing and narratives are closely linked, they "are not the same thing, nor are they interchangeable terms" (Crow & Lawlor, 2016, p. 480). A frame may construct the essence of a problem (Shanahan et al., 2018); it is a perspective from which a certain situation can be made sense of and acted upon (Rein & Schön, 1993). Instead, narratives result from frames and "provide connections that further help generate meaning" (Crespy et al., 2024, p. 959). Moreover, "narratives have distinguishing structural characteristics that frames do not" (Shanahan et al., 2018, p. 929), such as characters and plots (on the differrence between frames and narratives see also Coticchia & Di Giulio, 2023; Dudley, 2013; Radaelli, 1995).

Having clarified the analytical distinction between frames and narratives, in this article, we build on the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) scholarship (Crow & Lawlor, 2016; Jones et al., 2022; Shanahan et al., 2018) and integrate framing into narrative analysis. Our attempt aims to provide a comprehensive and granular explanation of how Southern European media portray the role of European actors and institutions in migration governance.

## 3.1 | Narratives and the Narrative Policy Framework

A policy narrative is a set of claims and arguments that actors, including media, construct and espouse in relation to a certain policy situation (Roe, 1994). These claims and arguments pertain to the policy issue that needs to be addressed, the causes of that issue, or the policy measures aimed at resolving it (Boswell et al., 2011; Esposito & Terlizzi, 2023; Terlizzi, 2021). To operationalize the concept of narrative, we rely on the NPF, a well-established analytical approach to empirically investigate the narratives through which actors construct policy realities. The framework has a structuralist view of narratives, which are defined as having a generalizable narrative form (Jones et al., 2022). Although the NPF takes a structuralist position, its ontological assumptions reside within social constructivism. In effect, the framework builds upon interpretivist approaches to the study of narratives (Fischer & Forester, 1993; Roe, 1994; Stone, 2012) and this article follows along the NPF's interpretive tradition (Gray & Jones, 2016; Jones & Radaelli, 2016; Terlizzi, 2021). Moreover, our study resonates with the ongoing effort to expand the thematic and geographic focus of the NPF—a framework originating from the United States—to European contexts and a wider range of policy areas (Stauffer & Kuenzler, 2021). In fact, the NPF has primarily been used to investigate environmental and energy policy (Schlaufer et al., 2022), while it has rarely been applied to the field of migration (McBeth & Lybecker, 2018) in European countries (Terlizzi, 2021).

The NPF defines a narrative as consisting of several core components. These are the *setting* (the policy problem and its context); the *characters* (the policy actors which can be individuals, organizations, or institutions); the *moral of the story* (the policy solution); and the *plot* (the story device that describes causal relationships between the narrative elements). The characters are generally the *victims* (those who are harmed by the problem), the *villains* (those who are causing the problem), and the *heroes* (those who can potentially fix the problem). As elucidated by Crow and Lawlor (2016: 478), "this does not mean that every narrative contains all of these elements." However, there are two necessary conditions for a

statement to be considered a policy narrative. First, a policy narrative must contain a stance or a judgment on a policy-related behavior. Second, a policy narrative must contain at least one character. These two conditions differentiate "a policy narrative from other policy texts such as fact lists and brings the story into action. In sum, policy stance or judgment of policy-related behaviour + story character = policy narrative" (Shanahan et al., 2013, p. 457). In this article, we especially focus on three narrative elements: the setting, the characters, and the plot.

## 3.2 | The setting as issue framing

The setting is the policy issue at stake. In operationalizing the setting, and in integrating framing into narrative analysis, we follow NPF scholarship (Jones et al., 2022; Shanahan et al., 2018) and characterize the setting as issue framing. We define frame "as a process of information selection and emphasis that socially constructs the problem definition" (Shanahan et al., 2018, p. 924; see also Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). Framing sets the stage for telling narratives, serving as a border (a frame) within which narratives with policy protagonists unfold.

Media framing shapes public perceptions of complex and contentious phenomena, such as large-scale irregular migration, often depicted as "crises." Many studies have examined the framing of migration issues in media, identifying economic, cultural, and security frames (Bleich et al., 2015; Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Heidenreich et al., 2019). In particular, scholars in international relations have focused on the framing of migration as a security issue. Although some studies question the claim that migration has been successfully securitized (Boswell, 2007) most agree that the discourses and practices surrounding EU migration governance have undergone an increasing securitization process (Christian & Léonard, 2020; Huysmans, 2000). Securitization scholars have broken down the framing of migration as a security issue by identifying a variety of discourses linking migration to specific threats like terrorism, crime, infectious diseases, and the erosion of social cohesion and the welfare state (Bourbeau, 2011).

Given the pervasive securitization of migration, keywords associated with security are among the most important media frames in migration coverage. We have therefore identified a security frame that captures European actors' positive or negative role in affecting the security of Southern EU member states, allegedly undermined by the threat of mass irregular migration. While security discourses call for continuous vigilance "to anticipate and minimize risks" (Moreno-Lax, 2018, p. 121), humanitarianism and the discourses associated thereto refer to activities that are "intended to relieve suffering, stop preventable harm, save lives at risk, and improve the welfare of vulnerable populations" (Barnett, 2013, p. 383). Scholarship on migration to Europe highlights the coexistence of discourses of threat and vulnerability simultaneously framing irregular migrants as both "a risk" and "at risk" due to the perilousness of their journeys (Little & Vaughan-Williams, 2017). Indeed, several studies have highlighted the salience of humanitarian discourses in media, stressing that, while mainly serving the purpose of attracting sympathy towards the plight of those rescued at sea, framing devices victimizing migrants may inadvertently contribute to framing irregular migration as a threat to the safety of migrants themselves, thereby legitimizing tighter border enforcement (D'Amato & Lucarelli, 2019). Given the importance of humanitarian discourses, we also identified a humanitarian frame, capturing the positive or negative role of European actors in preventing

deaths at sea, addressing the suffering of migrants, and safeguarding their right to international protection.

As they serve as a basis for discussion and action (Laws & Rein, 2003; Wagenaar & Cook, 2003), mobilize meanings and shape conceptions of problems, opportunities, and policy interventions (Healey et al., 2003), frames are often used to study how effective certain policies are considered by specific media. We therefore identify an (in)efficiency media frame, comprising of all the keywords that serve as cues for media assessment of the efficiency of the European actors in addressing large-scale irregular migration or lack thereof.

Last, the notion of solidarity is another key concept in migration and EU studies alike. Many scholars have focused on discourses and practices of solidarity towards asylum seekers (Bauder & Juffs, 2020). Scholars of EU integration, on the other hand, have extensively examined the relevance of solidarity in EU treaties and started investigating the tension between the EU asylum system, which places a disproportionate burden on EU countries of first entry, and solidarity between EU member states (Dickson, 2019). Research has also focused on solidarity discursive strategies employed by members of the European Parliament to demand redistributive responsibility-sharing mechanisms between member states, as well as to blame the EU lack of solidarity with their country of origin (Kaufmann, 2021). Burden sharing, redistribution, and other words associated thereto are also likely to figure prominently in Southern European media, often fraught with the claim that the EU left its Mediterranean member states alone or the invocation of an EU-wide solution to the crisis. We therefore identified and assessed the prominence of a discursive frame revolving around European institution and member states' solidary or unsolidary approach towards Southern EU countries of first entry. Table 1 summarizes the key frames providing the foundational framework for analyzing the narrative setting.

**TABLE 1**  The setting: framing of irregular migration to Europe.

| Positive | Negative |
|---|---|
| *Efficiency* | *Inefficiency* |
| European actors as<br>• Quick<br>• Effective<br>• Efficient<br>• Coherent/united | European actors as<br>• Slow<br>• Ineffective<br>• Inefficient<br>• Incoherent/divided |
| *Humanitarianism* | *Unhumanitarianism* |
| European actors as<br>• Concerned for migrants' safety<br>• Concerned for human rights | European actors as<br>• Unconcerned for migrants' safety<br>• Unconcerned for human rights |
| *Security* | *Insecurity* |
| European actors as<br>• Enhancing Southern member states' security | European actors as<br>• Detrimental to Southern member states' security |
| *Solidarity* | *Unsolidarity* |
| European actors as<br>• Solidary towards member states of first entry | European actors as<br>• Unsolidary towards member states of first entry |

## 3.3 | Characters

Characters are particularly relevant to our study. In fact, media narratives require actors playing specific roles. Irregular migration coverage is no exception, as it involves a plethora of individual and institutional actors playing a variety of different roles. The existing literature has covered a number of them. Unsurprisingly, many studies have focused on migrants themselves, often portrayed as an unidentified threatening mass or deprived of agency by being described as victims in need of rescue (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2017). Others have focused on human smugglers. The fight against human smugglers has been a leitmotiv of EU action on irregular migration against the Mediterranean and the main mandate of its Common Security and Defence Policy operation (CSDP) EUNAVFOR Med "Sophia," focused on "disrupting smuggling networks." Scholars, however, have questioned these narratives, criticizing the effectiveness and unintended consequences of EU antismuggling policies and highlighting the blurred boundaries of these categories and the ambivalent role these actors play (Moreno-Lax, 2018; Perkowski & Squire, 2019). With the partial exception of Frontex (Pollak & Slominski, 2009), EU institutions, agencies, and member states have rarely been identified as actors on the migration crisis stage. In our article, we pin down the role of the EU at large as well as specific EU institutions (e.g., Commission, Council, and Parliament), policy frameworks (e.g., the Dublin Regulations), agencies (e.g., Frontex) and missions (e.g., EUNAVFOR Med and Triton) as well as specific countries (e.g., France, Germany, and the Visegrad states) and leaders (e.g., Macron, Merkel, and Orban).

As noted by role theorists, discourses at large—and media discourses in particular—often attribute conventional, simplified, and prearranged role to specific actors, which are therefore turned into stereotyped characters. As a result, media discourses are often fraught with hypersimplified tropes. Those who are supposedly causing a problem (like the abovementioned smugglers in the case of migration) are assigned the role of *villains* and stigmatized accordingly; those who are harmed by a problem obviously play the role of *victims*; those who are addressing the problem, by contrast, are portrayed as the *heroes*. To these conventional NPF actors, we add a fourth category of actors who are not necessarily unwilling to help, but are unable to do so because they are divided or lack the authority, resolve, and political support required to take effective action. We refer to those characters as *weaklings*.

## 3.4 | Plot

The plot is the story device that describes the characters' actions and interactions vis-à-vis the setting (Jones et al., 2022; Schlaufer, 2018; Terlizzi, 2021). In operationalizing the plot, it is common practice in the NPF literature to refer to the seminal work by Stone (2012) who distinguishes between stories of change and stories of power (see also Blum & Kuhlmann, 2019; Kuhlmann & Blum, 2021). Within stories of change, three types of story lines can be identified: *stories of decline*, which convey despair by telling that things are set to only get worse; *stories of stymied progress*, which describe how the situation was desperate, got better (due to a hero), but is worsening again because of the interference of another actor (with the hero's work); *change-is-only-an-illusion stories*, in which ostensible improvements (or deteriorations) of a given situation are told to be, in fact, illusory. Other three types of story lines can be distinguished within the broad category of stories of power: *stories of control*, which offer hope and tell how a bad situation can be controlled and improved; *conspiracy stories*, where few powerful people secretly control the situation to their advantage; *blame-the-victim stories*, which assign

responsibility to those suffering from the problem whereby victims are prompted to change their self-imposed situation.

## 3.5 | Research hypotheses

European politicians often blame the EU and its member states for unpopular decisions, particularly regarding irregular migration. The Mediterranean's increased irregular migration has eroded EU support, with criticism directed at the EU's failure in border control and fair asylum seeker distribution. This intensified Euroscepticism and caused discontent among Southern European states, who lament the lack of EU-wide burden-sharing. In particular, we have discussed that blame games involve assigning responsibility for errors, often termed the "blame game." European blame games often involve shifting blame to others, notably the EU. Our first hypothesis therefore reads as follows:

> **H1.** Like national politicians, Southern member states' media blame game will feature a tendency to shift the blame attached to the mismanagement of migratory flows onto European actors and institutions.

As of the frames that newspapers will use to cover migration, we expect security-related terms to be central in media coverage, in accordance with the large body of scholarship documenting the extensive securitization of irregular mobility to Europe. Besides securitizing migration as a threat, Southern European newspapers—whose population directly witness the tragedies arising from irregular border crossing—should also feature a humanitarian discourses, portraying migrants not only as a risk but also as at risk. Last, given the salience of these issues in the political discourse of Southern European states, we expect discussions about solidarity, burden sharing, and the efficiency of European asylum governance to emerge from their reporting on irregular migration. Last, considering the significance of stories of change in (migration) policy reforms (Blum & Kuhlmann, 2019) and the crucial role played by the media in advocating for changes in the policy agenda, we also anticipate to find stories of change as prominent in our corpus. However, given the extremely polarized politicization of migration to Europe, we also expect significant differences across newspapers with different political orientation in both issue framing (the narrative setting) and the portrayal of characters within the plots. We therefore hypothesize that:

> **H2.** Conservative-leaning newspapers portray irregular migration within a negative issue framing emphasizing concerns related to inefficiency, insecurity, and unsolidarity, while liberal news outlets will focus on the insufficient protection of migrants' lives and fundamental rights.

> **H3.** Conservative news outlets will be more inclined to blame European actors and institutions by portraying them as either villains or weaklings, while liberal news outlets will likely attribute the role of unsolidary villains to member states opposing the redistribution of asylum seekers. These characters are mainly the protagonists of stories of decline, change-is-only-an-illusion stories, and stories of stymied progress.

# 4 | RESEARCH DESIGN, DATA, AND METHODS

We leverage quantitative and qualitative content analysis to identify narratives in Italian, Maltese, and Spanish media. Italian, Maltese, and Spanish newspapers are crucial cases in our research. Due to their geographic positions as gateways to the EU, Italy, Malta, and Spain are situated at the forefront of migratory routes. As they often serve as EU countries of first entry, they are responsible for hosting migrants until their asylum applications are processed. Moreover, irregular migratory routes across the Central and Western Mediterranean are among the deadliest worldwide. The tragic implications of irregular mobility and border enforcement policies arguably increase the salience of irregular migration and the controversy surrounding EU migration governance.

Our large-N analysis was carried out on a corpus of online newspaper articles about irregular migration published between 2013 and 2020. Specifically, we have selected for each country two newspapers with different ideological perspectives—one more conservative and one more liberal—among those that were available on the online LexisNexis and Factiva newspaper databases: Il *Giornale* and *La Repubblica* for Italy, the *Times of Malta* and *Malta Independent* for Malta, and *ABC* and *El Mundo* for Spain, reviewing a total of 9186 articles.

To narrow down our focus to irregular migration—which is the type of mobility most frequently portrayed as a threat or an emergency—we have filtered the articles by selecting only those containing the words "migrants," "sea," and "boats," thereby excluding any news items irrelevant to this investigation that could be focusing on other aspects of migration. To identify discursive patterns across different sources within our very large corpus, we carried out first a quantitative, computer-assisted text analysis with the content analysis software ATLAS.ti. This allowed us to pinpoint text segments[2] including specific keywords[3] referring to EU institutions and its member states. This quantitative analysis of relevant keywords has been complemented by a qualitative examination of the broader discourses in which the passages were embedded. To this aim, each text segment has been meticulously reviewed and interpreted. Finally, all the relevant meanings in the data have been translated into categories of a coding frame. Two authors conducted the coding process independent from one another and the coding results were then validated through extensive open discussions involving all authors.

The qualitative coding strategy consisted of two phases. During the first phase, we coded text segments according to the narrative setting, namely, the issue framing discussed in the previous section (Table 1): (in)efficiency, (un)humanitarianism, (in)security, and (un)solidarity. By interpreting each text segment, we have assessed its positive or negative meaning. Accordingly, a sentence stating that Frontex failed to assist migrants at sea or the European Commission failed to enforce asylum seekers' redistribution schemes would be coded as instances of unhumanitarianism and unsolidarity; by contrast, the acknowledgment that a EUNAVFOR Med ship rescued a group of migrants in danger of drowning or that another European country accepted the relocation of some asylum seekers on its territory would count as positive instances of humanitarianism and solidarity. We also fleshed out the key European actors and institutions that are cited by media, assessing the relative frequency of mentions to European institutions, policies, agencies, missions, and leaders. Sentences with no clear positive or negative meaning were coded as neutral. During the second phase, we coded text segments according to the *characters* and *plot* derived from our theoretical framework presented above.

# 5 | FINDINGS

In this section, we show the results of our analysis, highlighting the relative prominence of the setting, characters, and plots in Southern European newspapers.

## 5.1 | The setting

As illustrated in Figure 1, a negative framing of European actors' addressing irregular migration dominates across all the newspapers we examined. This trend is relatively consistent across all years (2013–2020). Europe's alleged lack of solidarity towards member states affected by large-scale irregular migration clearly emerges as the most salient frame used by Italian, Maltese, and Spanish newspapers when discussing the role of European actors in migration governance across the Mediterranean. This critique is widespread across liberal and conservative outlets alike, but is significantly more pronounced across openly Eurosceptic, anti-immigration outlets like *Il Giornale*. More mainstream conservative outlets like *ABC* and *Times of Malta* also give comparative more coverage to the lack of burden-sharing. This frame is also predominant in liberal newspapers like *La Repubblica*, which, however, do acknowledge much more at length the existence of some instances of asylum seekers' redistribution and solidarity towards EU countries of first entry.

Europe is also framed negatively as an ineffective actor, divided, incoherent, and unable to act swiftly and decisively in response to large-scale irregular migration. This frame is salient not only in Eurosceptic outlets like *Il Giornale* but can also be found among liberal newspapers like *La Repubblica* and *Malta Independent*. Such more liberal outlets are also more sensitive to the
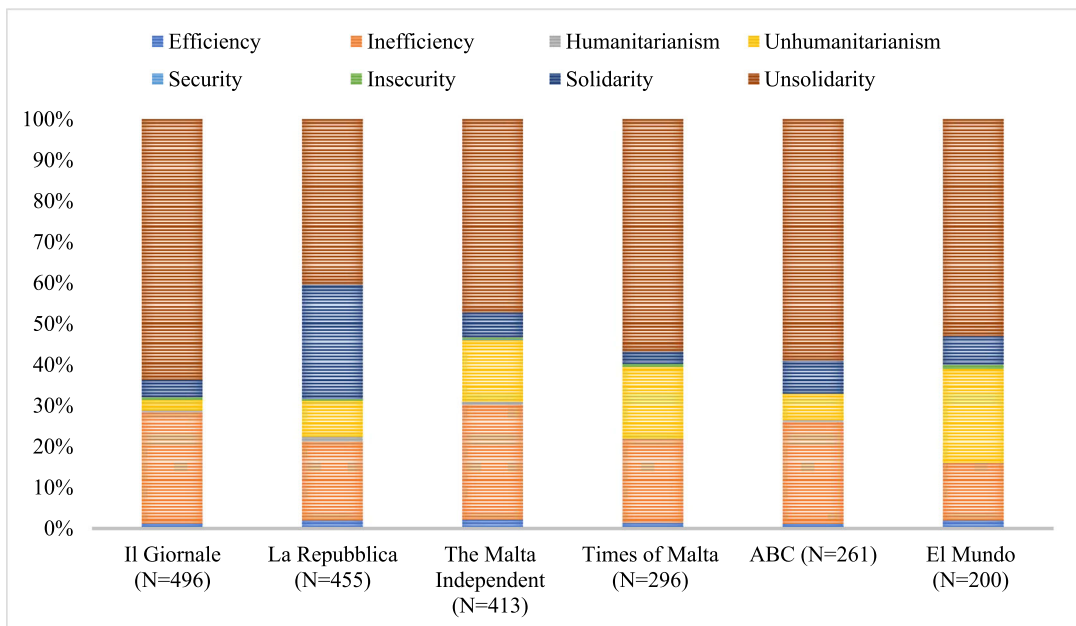


**FIGURE 1** Issue framing across Southern European newspapers (%, all years). *N* = number of coded text segments.

alleged negative humanitarian implications of European policies. Acknowledgments of EU efficiency or positive contribution to addressing the humanitarian crisis taking place at Europe's Southern borders, on the other hand, are virtually absent across all the newspapers examined.

## 5.2 | Characters

As explained above, besides identifying specific frames related to the setting, we also tried to provide a more granular understanding by identifying the specific characters mentioned by each newspaper and the critique (or praise) addressed thereto.

In many cases, newspapers themselves formulate vague criticism or appeals broadly directed at "Europe," or "the EU," without pinpointing specific countries, institutions, or agencies. Sometimes however, blame is specifically attributed to certain actors, like Frontex, mostly criticized as inefficient, the Dublin Regulations, often blamed as unsolidary, and Visegrad countries like Hungary and Poland, also criticized as unwilling to provide any burden-sharing. Consistent with our hypotheses, these blame games are often informed by newspapers' political orientation: *Il Giornale*, for instance, directed most of its criticism for lack of solidarity to EU institutions, France, and Germany, while La *Repubblica* stigmatized Central European countries led by right-wing populist majorities more vehemently.

In Italy, Malta, and Spain alike, European actors and institutions are largely portrayed as having a negative role, appearing as either villains who caused the problem and/or do not want to address it, or as weaklings that cannot tackle it effectively and decisively. In cases like Italy—where migration became an especially polarized issue and the newspapers examined diverged starkly in their ideological orientation—actors like the European Commission, France, and Germany, were narrated as causing problems by one outlet and as solution providers by another, thereby appearing simultaneously as heroes and villains. Agencies like Frontex and missions such as Triton and EUNAVFOR Med Sophia were mostly depicted as weaklings. Overall, EU institutions, the Dublin regulation(s), and the Visegrad countries are seen as the villains (see Appendix 2, Figure A1).

Maltese and Spanish newspapers are less specific in assigning to European actors a role that falls squarely within the character categories identified above. The findings from these cases, however, are consistent with those from their Italian counterparts. European institutions and agencies are largely portrayed negatively, either as villains or as weaklings unable to tackle the crisis. Only in relatively few cases are actors like Emmanuel Macron, Germany, or the EU at large portrayed as heroes seeking to address the problem in a decisive and effective fashion (see Appendix 2, Figures A2 and A3).

## 5.3 | Plots

Remarkable similarities can be found in the main stories told by Southern European newspapers. In Italy, Malta, and Spain alike, newspapers mostly tell a story of decline where migration is seen as a wicked problem that cannot be solved. Unsurprisingly, this bleak picture is especially prominent in the years when irregular crossings and casualties at sea are higher.

In the case of Italy, stories of decline peak in the period between 2014 and 2016, and declined afterwards, but did not completely disappear (Figure 2). Only in 2018 did stories of
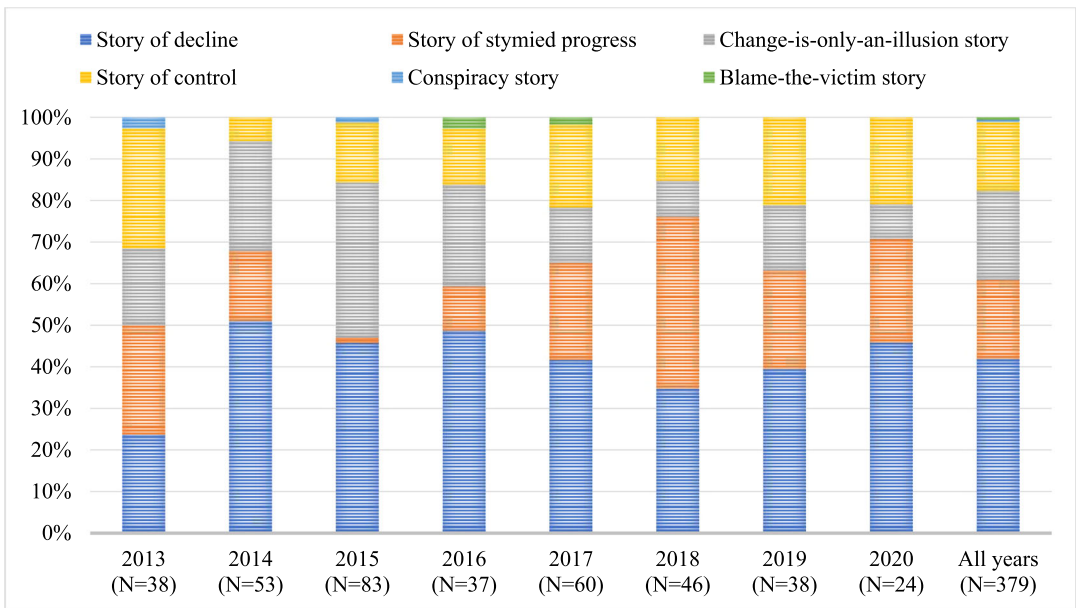
**FIGURE 2**    The main stories told by Italian newspapers (%). $N$ = number of coded text segments.
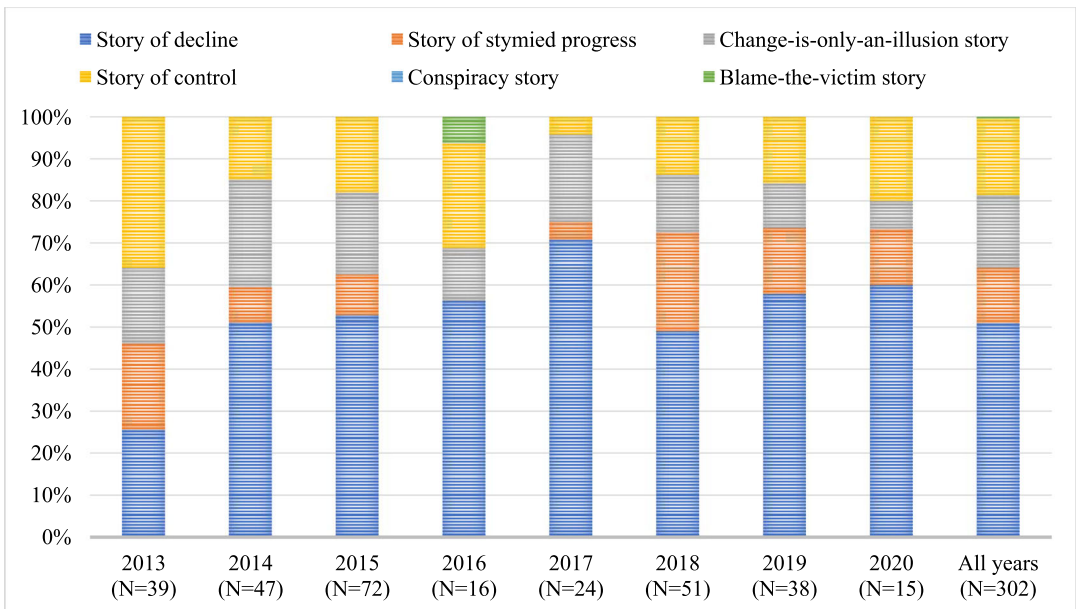


**FIGURE 3**    The main stories told by Maltese newspapers (%). $N$ = number of coded text segments.

stymied progress become slightly predominant, mainly because of *Il Giornale*'s portrayal of the Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini's closed ports policy and security decrees as solutions to the crisis that were being sabotaged by villains like France and Germany. Moreover, consistently with the findings presented above, characters like Triton, EUNAVFOR Med
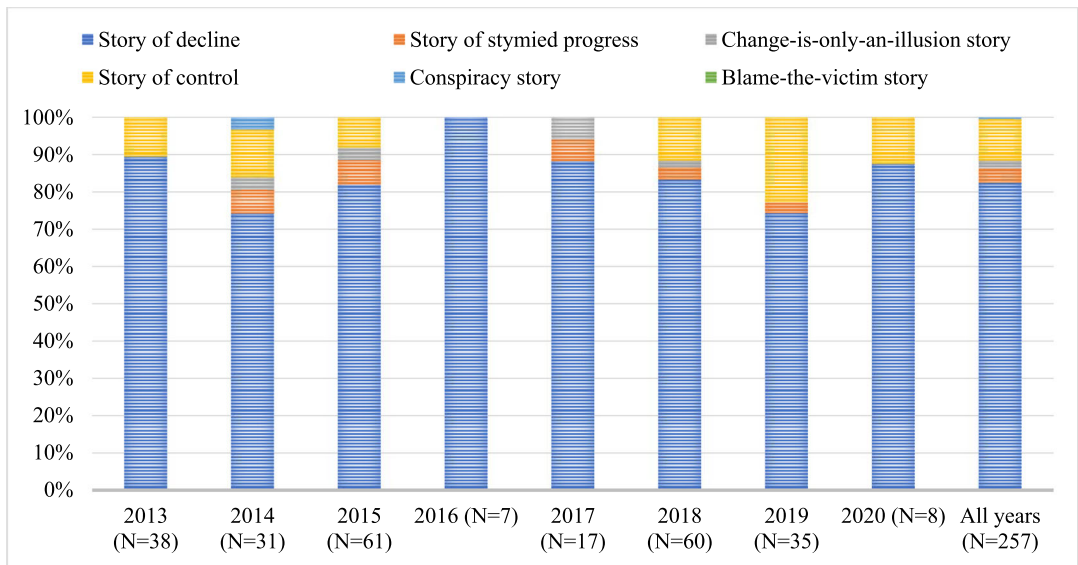
**FIGURE 4** The main stories told by Spanish newspapers (%). *N* = number of coded text segments.

Sophia, and Frontex are the weaklings protagonists of change-is-only-and-illusion stories (see Appendix 2, Figure A4).

In Malta, stories of decline gained momentum in 2014, peaked in 2017, and resurfaced in 2018–2019, when Italy's policy of closed ports resulted in more asylum seekers' disembarkations on Maltese territory (Figure 3). The protagonists of these stories are villains such as Dublin and the EU at large. Characters such as Triton and Frontex are either weaklings or villains within stories of stymied progress or change-is-only an illusion stories (see Appendix 2, Figure A5).

In Spain, stories of decline dominate relative to other stories (Figure 4), featuring Hungary's President Orban, the Visegrad group, and the EU at large as the main villains (see Appendix 2, Figure A6). Interestingly, Dublin regulations are seen as the potential protagonist of a story of control rather than a villain within stories of decline or stories of stymied progress as in the cases of Malta and Italy. In this respect, it should be noted that in Italy Dublin regulations are discussed more frequently than in Malta and Spain.

Overall, in Italy and Malta stories of decline coexist with a small number of stories of control, which provide hope by showing how a certain problem can be addressed. As highlighted by the existence of stories of stymied progress and change-is-only-an illusion stories, however, Southern European media narratives portray a predominantly bleak picture of irregular migration governance and European attempts to tackle it.

Table 2 provides a sample of the most relevant quotes from the coded material (the entire coded material is available in Appendix 1), exemplifying how key actors and institutions have been portrayed in different stories.

# 6 | DISCUSSION

Our analysis highlights several noteworthy findings. First, Italian, Maltese, and Spanish media coverage feature blame games characterized by the tendency to shift blame onto the EU and its member states (H1). Media coverage is remarkably consistent in providing a negative portrayal of

**TABLE 2** Sample of exemplifying quotes.

| Source and year | Quotation | Frame (setting) | Actor | Role (character) | Story (plot) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Il Giornale 2015 | [C]ircumstance not to be underestimated that highlights how Triton is now out of control since it practically acts as a "companion" to migratory flows. | Inefficiency | Triton | Weakling | Change-is-only-an-illusion |
| La Repubblica 2015 | "Europe finds resources to bomb, but not to save innocent victims […], says the monsignor. "Operation Triton has failed to strengthen the rescue of lives at sea compared to the Italian Mare Nostrum: a disgrace that weighs on the European conscience." | Inefficiency | Triton | Weakling | Change-is-only-an-illusion |
| ABC 2015 | Meanwhile, Europe continues to discuss the problem without the Triton operation being able to stop the drama and without reaching an agreement on the distribution of refugees in the different countries of the European Union. | Inefficiency | Triton | Weakling | Decline |
| ABC 2015 | Death of 300 migrants shows the failures of the EU's Operation Triton. | Inefficiency | Triton | Weakling | Decline |
| El Mundo 2015 | But according to Frontex, the material and human resources available to deal with this migration crisis are still insufficient. | Inefficiency | Triton/Frontex | Weakling | Decline |
| Malta Independent 2015 | If Triton can't be changed, then Triton is not the solution, however, many resources one gives it. | Inefficiency | Triton | Weakling | Change-is-only-an-illusion |
| Times of Malta 2015 | Amnesty said although its contribution was not negligible, the Triton mission remained "insufficient" to face the current and foreseeable demand for search and rescue, and the gap left | Inefficiency | Triton | Weakling | Change-is-only-an-illusion |

**TABLE 2** (Continued)

| Source and year | Quotation | Frame (setting) | Actor | Role (character) | Story (plot) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | was clearly linked to the diminished search and rescue operations. | | | | |
| Il Giornale 2018 | If landings have dropped from 110,000 to 20,000 it is because we have used an iron fist," Salvini explained. "While waiting for France to apologize and stop bringing migrants illegally into Italy I control the border." | Unsolidarity | France | Villain (Salvini is the hero) | Stymied progress |
| Il Giornale 2020 | EU plan on migrants new hoax on Italy: helping us is optional. | Unsolidarity | EU/Europe | Villain (Italy is the victim) | Decline |
| La Repubblica 2020 | EU remains silent and among countries there are those who deny reception. | Unsolidarity | EU/Europe | Villain (Europe is the villain) | Decline |
| Malta independent 2020 | Summer is almost over, yet the European Union has done practically nothing to help countries like Malta and Italy on the migration issue. | Unsolidarity | EU/Europe | Villain | Decline |
| Times of Malta 2020 | Malta and other EU border countries have repeatedly complained about a lack of solidarity by other member states. | Unsolidarity | EU/Europe | Villain | Decline |
| ABC 2020 | Requests for reception by EU countries are coming in at a slow rate, and once again the EU seems to be encountering all sorts of difficulties in setting up a plan for the redistribution of these people. | Unsolidarity | EU/Europe | Villain | Decline |

(Continues)

**TABLE 2** (Continued)

| Source and year | Quotation | Frame (setting) | Actor | Role (character) | Story (plot) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Il Giornale 2013 | Greece used to be the "colander" of the EU, but since last year the situation has improved. Frontex funded the Aspida (Shield) mission: 1800 reinforcement troops on the borders starting with the Turkish one. | Efficiency | Frontex | Hero | Control |
| La Repubblica 2019 | As of today, Italy can say it is no longer alone. The principle that those who arrive in Italy and Malta arrive in Europe is accepted for the first time. | Solidarity | EU/Europe | Hero | Control |
| The Malta Independent 2015 | Germany takes in more asylum seekers than any other country in Europe—and expects to handle at least 800,000 this year. | Solidarity | Germany | Hero | Control |
| Time of Malta 2018 | We believe in a Europe that can concretely tackle the issue of migration in a collective and coordinated manner. | Inefficiency | Europe | Hero | Control |
| La Repubblica 2017 | It was the individual nations that were unwilling to give Frontex the tools and mandate it needed to deal with the issue. | Inefficiency | Frontex | Victim | Decline |

Abbreviation: EU, European Union.

European actors and institutions' role, criticized as unsolidary and ineffective. This picture is shared across countries, over time, and between conservative and liberal media outlets. This consistency is especially remarkable given the differences that do exist between these countries' general public opinion towards the EU, history of migration, and political culture. Moreover, this convergence differs significantly from media coverage of migrants themselves and other actors that play a meaningful role in migration governance, like sea rescue NGOs. While the portrayal of these actors sharply differs depending on the conservative or liberal orientation of the news outlet examined (cf. Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Cusumano & Bell, 2021), newspapers' reporting of European actors and institutions' role in migration governance remains consistently critical irrespective of outlets' positioning in the political spectrum. Even liberal pro-European outlets have vocally criticized the EU for its failure to act in response to irregular migration. Moreover, we find that more liberal outlets give greater prominence to the humanitarian externalities of the EU's dysfunctional migration governance, albeit to a lower extent than expected. While liberal media show more concern about migrants' humanitarian situation than their conservative counterparts, this frame remains marginal compared to the much greater emphasis given to alleged lack of solidarity and inefficiency. Our findings, therefore, do not fully support H2.

With respect to H3, our analysis shows that newspapers' ideological stance does affect the specific target and content of newspapers' criticism. Consequently, while blame-shifting onto Europe is pervasive, the positioning of specific media outlets informs whereabouts blame will be attributed. In accordance with our hypothesis, conservative outlets more frequently criticize the EU at large as well as its alleged hegemons—France and Germany—while more liberal outlets are more likely to specifically blame those actors opposing the redistribution of asylum seekers among member states, like Poland and Hungary. Moreover, in line with H3, our study shows that Southern European media narratives portray a predominantly bleak picture of irregular migration governance, where European actors and institutions are mainly represented as villains and weaklings protagonists of stories of decline, change-is-only-an-illusion stories, and stories of stymied progress. However, the empirical material also features some instances of heroes acting as the protagonists of stories of control.

Overall, our analysis suggests that media outlets at both sides of the spectrum have played a pivotal role in borrowing and amplifying politicians' tendency to shift blame onto the EU level. This finding supports the argument that blame games are pervasive in EU governance and that the migration crisis has played a meaningful role in fueling Euroscepticism across Southern European member states.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

By examining how Southern European member states' newspapers portray European irregular migration governance, our study has sought to bridge the gap between the scholarship on policy narratives, the literature on how media frame migration, and the study of the politics of blame in Europe. We have done so by integrating the concepts of framing and narrative, something that has long been suggested by the NPF literature (Crow & Lawlor, 2016; Shanahan et al., 2018). Moreover, by focusing on the realm of European migration governance, our article has contributed to widening the NPF's thematic and geographic scope.

Our findings especially add to the scholarship on blame games in the EU during situations framed as crises (Hinterleitner et al., 2023). Previous studies have documented the tendency of national policy-makers to shift blame onto Brussels (Heinkelmann-Wild & Zangl, 2020). Our analysis shows that such blame games resonate across European media as well. Southern European

media have reflected reputation-damaging blame dynamics (Hinterleitner, 2018; Hinterleitner & Sager, 2019; Kuenzler, 2021), echoing and amplifying politicians' tendency to shift the blame on EU institutions, but also other member states. While this tendency was shared by conservative and liberal media alike, newspapers' ideological orientation shaped the specific target of blame games: while conservative, more Eurosceptic media mainly blame European institutions, liberal outlets' criticism mainly targeted unsolidary Central European countries.

Moreover, this article highlights that blame games and the securitization of migration to Europe are inextricably linked. Our findings suggest that the framing of irregular migration as a crisis or a threat coexists and overlaps with the tendency to offload the blame arising from the alleged failure to control borders onto EU institutions and other member states. The overlap of these two tendencies is no coincidence. The framing of migration as a threat raises the demand for tight and ultimately unfeasible border enforcement strategies which, in turn, trigger blame-shifting dynamics across both conservative and liberal media outlets.

Needless to say, more research is needed to address the limitations of this study and advance our findings. By focusing on EU countries of first entry, our findings cannot identify differences in the blame games in place in Southern European member states located at EU external borders and other EU member states. Consequently, future studies should examine how migration is portrayed by other European media and the extent to which they place blame on European institutions, Central, or Southern European member states. Moreover, our analysis solely examines six media outlets, which may not allow for systematically gauging the role of newspapers' ideological position on the types of frames and narratives they use. To study the interplay between media narratives, blame games, and media ideology, a larger sample of media outlets is in order. In addition, more systematic efforts are required to map the interplay between securitization, blame games, and policy narratives. Existing securitization scholarship has noted the linkage between securitization and conspiracy narratives. Future studies should look more in-depth at how different types of stories contribute to framing migration and other issues as existential threats.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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## ENDNOTES

[1] Hereafter, by using the terms "Europe" or "European" we are referring to both the European Union level and European Union's member state level.

[2] We use "text segment" to refer to the extracts from the corpus that we used as units of analysis. Each unit is generally composed of multiple sentences (approximately 65 words) or paragraphs. However, some units are larger or shorter for two main reasons. First, the corpus is written in three different languages which articulates sentences using a significantly different amount of words (English is much more synthetic than Spanish or Italian). Second, often a larger group of sentences or paragraphs carried information useful for the coding and therefore it was necessary to include it in the unit of analysis.

[3] Examples of keywords include Berlin, Brussels, Dublin, EU, Eunavor, Europe, European Commission, European Leaders, European Parliament, European Union, France, Frontex, Germany, Hungary, Macron, Merkel, Orban, Paris, Poland, Sophia, Triton, Ursula von der Leyen, Visegrad.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.