

Empathy, geography and immigration

Political framing of sea migrant arrivals in European media

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Abstract

How is European media framing sensitive to events such as refugee border crossing and irregular migrants' arrivals? While news outlets adjust the tone around immigration following ideology, do the contextual characteristics of these incidents matter? This article explores two factors that could explain the varying framing of these highly political events in European media beyond ideology. One explanation focuses on the role of migrants' conditions, such as migrants' way of transit and subsequent human suffering (or lack thereof). Another emphasizes the role of geography, in particular the location of migrants' territorial identification relative to the receiving communities. Focusing on the case of sea migration and small boat arrivals in Southern Europe, I argue that the emotional triggers determined by migrants' transit and the geographical point of detection systematically moderate each other, and jointly affect how the media describe these cross-border immigration events. Empirically, the article presents original newspaper framing data from Greece, Italy, and Spain that collates geospatial information of immigrants' sea transit and the related number of injuries and deaths during transit. Statistical results indicate that media framing is more sympathetic to events involving suffering migrants, but that this positive framing diminishes if migrants are located only at the border of national territory and disappears if the migrants are identified in more distant, foreign waters. The results suggest nuanced conditions in which migration can be presented by the media aside from their ideological lenses.

Keywords: Immigration; refugees; emotions; geography; European media

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It is usually argued that the media coverage of immigration stories affects the way voters and political parties relate to immigrants' issues and how they position themselves in the immigration policy space. Along these lines, political scientists have argued that the narratives of massive immigration flows in Europe, such as the 2015 refugee crisis, and, more recently, the Ukrainian crisis, have mobilized different political factions across the European continent. Yet, the media framing around refugee arrivals and illicit cross-border movements are hardly fully understood, despite their increasing frequency. It is not obvious why the European media in certain circumstances adopt a sympathetic tone while at other times they show more adversity. For example, in summer 2015 the conservative Greek newspaper *Kathimerini* published articles on the 'tragedies in the Mediterranean' that emphatically stressed a 'desperate underwater grave' (Kathimerini, 2015).¹ Vice versa, in various instances Italy's progressive *La Repubblica* used lukewarm framings to report on 'illicit' migratory events (La Repubblica, 2013).²

Tackling this puzzle, this article concentrates on contextual factors that can contribute to the media framing of immigration in areas where migration is highly politicized. I focus specifically on a) migrants' conditions of transit, and b) the geographic location of migrants' identification. With respect to the former, I concentrate on conditions that trigger strong public reactions sought after by the media, notably: migrants' humanitarian circumstances, e.g. the lived experience of shipwrecks. With respect to the latter, I focus on immigrants' point of distance to (or entry in) the territory of the recipient countries. These factors, I argue, affect framing in addition to the ideological lenses of the media.

This paper explores the effect of these variables on media stories of refugees and transiting people (hereby comprehensively referred to as irregular migrants) in Southern Europe.³ I argue that human sufferance and geographic vicinity have diverse implications for different sections of a receiving population, and therefore potentially contrasting effects on media framing. For example, the distress of migrants in transit can trigger empathy (Newman et al., 2013; Adida et al., 2018), but high numbers of migrant casualties may also overwhelm local concerns and alienate the sense of human loss (Blinder, 2015). Similarly, geographic vicinity and distance to borders can have heterogeneous effects on migrants' perceptions, and therefore on media attitudes (Rudolph and Wagner, 2022).

Building on this intuition, I suggest that, aside from ideological positioning, media framing may be best explained as a function of the conditional relationship between these two factors. Accordingly, a higher amount of sufferance among migrants *closer* to domestic communities can

produce more humanitarian perspective-taking, and therefore more sympathetic media frames (on average). Vice versa, the *lack* of humanitarian distress among immigrants or, alternatively, stories of sufferance of *faraway* incoming migrants, are less likely to be framed as positive – i.e., empathic - media stories.

To test this argument, the paper exploits new observational data on instances of irregular sea migration in Southern Europe between 2000 and 2016. I match geospatial and demographic information of immigration incidents to a measurement of empathy in the major left and right newspaper articles of Greece, Italy, and Spain. I find that the more dramatic the count of missing migrants in transit, the more empathic the media stories, *especially if* the migrants are closer to the territory of the recipient country. By contrast, if migrants are far from domestic waters (around the border or beyond, in international sea), the empathy in the media drops dramatically. The results are robust to alternative measurements of migrants' sufferance, geography and additional estimations.

The findings suggest that the micro-level characteristics of migration significantly shape the media framing of immigration events in Europe, but also that immigrants' attributes may hardly work by themselves, and that the most substantive effects on media framing emerge from the interaction of emotionally charged and geographic bound information about migrants. These lessons broaden our understanding of the contextual dynamics of immigration politics in a world of high affective polarization (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart, 2009). While the results shed light on the informational mechanisms through which media stories may become more empathic, they also indicate the peril of disinvesting in media reporting. Without proper media on the ground (or, in this case, in high waters), the context of migration events remains vague and may explain apathic or even negative reactions to immigration flows. Hence, the results corroborate the claim that the features of recipient communities make a difference in the politics of immigration (Wong et al., 2012) and indicate how, by facilitating first-hand reporting and detailing migrants' 'closeness', the media may in fact channel support for immigration.

Theory

Media play a fundamental agenda setting role in most countries, and much research has focused on how reporting influences citizens' attitudes and public opinion. A critical number of studies have investigated the factors that may affect media framing of migration. Accordingly, mass media may prefer to narrate stories of incoming migrants as a function of how many resources the recipient

community need for their arrival, in order to pander to specific sections of society with fixed anti-immigrant opinions (Abdelaaty and Steele, 2020).⁴ In a similar vein, stories of incomers may reflect ethnic and racial perceptions and feed into stereotypes and prejudice held against out-groups (Magni, 2020).

If perspectives on immigration are a function of such factors, framing changes would then be rare (Kustov et al., 2021). However, there is abundant evidence that the media tone of public discussions around immigration can shift, sometimes even rapidly, in the short term. In this regard, scholars have suggested conditions that may alter the way migration is perceived and communicated within the same communities (Branton et al., 2011; Dunaway et al., 2010).

This research invites the question whether the way migration stories are organized in the public imaginary – and, thus, in the media – is sensitive to the contextual conditions in which migrants arrive to the recipient country. This question is relevant across the world, but especially in Europe, given the politicization of immigration across ideological lines. Following the claim that contextual attributes affect the framing of immigration, this article considers the conditions under which framing may become less ideological and still salient. I focus specifically on the magnitude of human sufferance in a migratory transit (along the lines of definitions in Newman et al., 2013; Adida et al., 2018) and the geographic proximity of immigrants to recipient communities as a measure of closeness that could placate or increase anxieties of receiving communities (Gessler et al., 2022; Rudolph and Wagner, 2021).

Migrants' sufferance, geography and migration narratives

While immigration is usually depicted through the ideological lenses of news outlets, at the onset of irregular arrivals (e.g., a refugee wave), the media framing of migrants' stories could be the product of various reactions. I argue that *empathic reactions* could be caused by the magnitude of sufferance of said migrants. Injuries and fatalities at transit have a sensational impact on the public imaginary, and could feature the relevant media story. At the same time, how much sufferance would trigger a sympathetic media frame? This is a hard question to answer. The image of a single migrant found dead in international sea could generate widespread empathy to immigrants in the public domain, yet a high number of shipwreck fatalities could cause a bigger alarm.

Importantly, the effect of emotional reactions to the sufferance of migrants may not be uniform or linear. Empathy caused by the humanitarian sufferance of migrants may be neutralized or

reinforced based on other contextual circumstances. Here I focus on the moderation caused by *the physical point of identification* of migrants.

My argument is that understanding the framing of media stories around irregular migrants requires thinking about the sufferance and geography attributes of migration events *jointly*.⁵ The location where migrants are identified determines how physically close recipient communities are to incomers and therefore how direct their impact will be on domestic communities. That said, the geographic location does not need to have clear effects. The perception of physical proximity may in fact cause a mix of reactions. Depending on whether immigrants are deemed vulnerable, a closer point of arrival may constitute a catalyst for solidarity or, alternatively, backlash.

In short, I argue that geographic proximity may be more clearly connected to more positive immigration framing *if* the magnitude of suffering of the migration event is high, and that this interaction has implications for media framing. There are at least two reasons why a dramatic level of sufferance (more fatalities) connected to a migration event that occurs close to recipient communities is more likely to be framed with empathy than a similarly dramatic but far away event. First, a geographically closer event is more salient to the focal country, and therefore more relevant to the communities the media caters. Furthermore, the closer the immigrants' transit, the more involved local individuals may be, especially in the case of humanitarian emergency. Vice versa, the more away the immigrants' point of identification, the more improbable contact with recipient communities, the fewer the implications of any potential loss of life, and the smaller the incentive of the media to frame immigration more positively than usual.

I test this hypothesis in Southern European countries, where the main mode of immigration - across the Mediterranean Sea – makes migration more detectable and associable to the contextual attributes addressed thus far.

Data and Methods

Identifying sea arrivals in Southern Europe is challenging, not least because of the difficulties of gathering consistent data on migrants' transit through space and time. For the case selection, I rely on the online repository named 'The Migrants' Files' (2016). Originally compiled by journalist agencies around Europe, this source was created as an aggregation of news of asylum seeking and human trafficking across the continent. The final version of the database covers all known migration instances around European borders between 2000 and 2016.

For this study, I focus on the onset of deadly migration on the way to Greece, Italy, and Spain. To date, these reflect the most beaten areas of irregular border crossing into the EU.⁶ As Figure 1 shows, the aggregate yearly average of missing migrants in the past two decades is high. The annual figure was around 900 before 2009. Between 2009 and 2016, migrant deaths substantively increased, reaching 2000 per year. Another reason to focus on the (deaths of) migrants on these routes is that in Italy, Greece, and Spain, transnational migration is a salient political topic, and the media has been active in representing the stories of migrants’ arrivals and the reactions of the national communities. In this respect, a critical feature of The Migrants’ Files is that the reported events are tagged to the most comprehensive and available pieces of news that reported the events. Leveraging these URLs, I employed the content of the retrievable media articles to construct the main outcome variable of this study. Additionally, I used *LexisNexis* to retrieve the stories of the events in two ideologically distinct newspapers for each of the three countries.

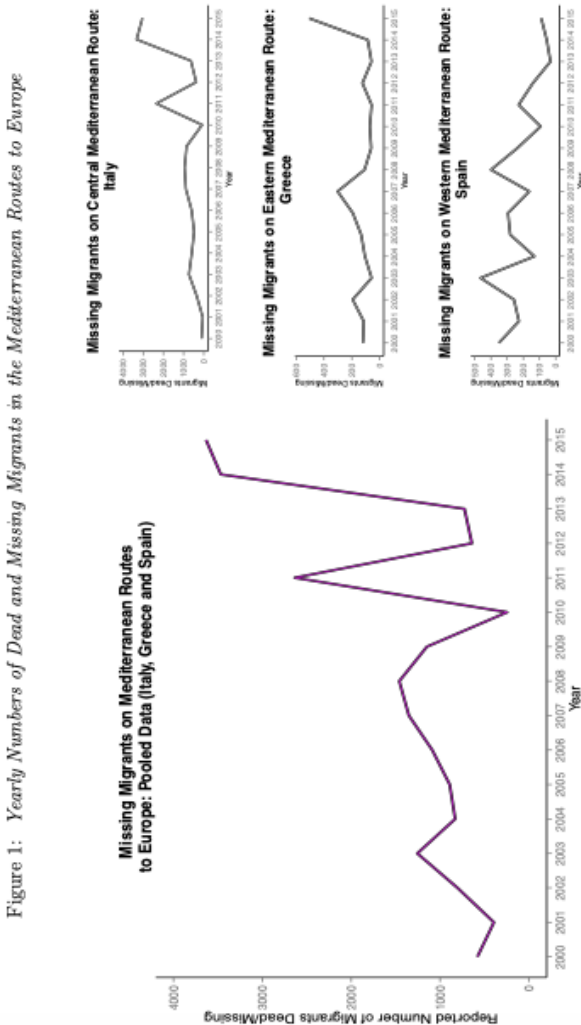


Figure 1. Yearly numbers of dead and missing migrants in the Mediterranean routes to Europe.

Note: Yearly aggregate (left) and individual country (right) numbers of dead and missing migrants as reported in ‘The Migrants’ Files’.

Dependent variable

My outcome of interest is *News Empathy*. The construction of this variable was performed by three multi-lingual coders and involved a dictionary-based qualitative content analysis of the collected media articles. The values were assigned to each relevant article related to a specific migrants’ event. In terms of scaling, *News Empathy* is measured over three values. Following scales of media attitudes (e.g., Branton et al., 2011), 0 corresponds to a framing that does not show any empathy and may in fact stress negative aspects of such events, e.g. the migrants’ illegal status. 1 corresponds to articles that convey some supportive reactions in the recipient community. 2 corresponds to a focus on the vulnerability of the migrants or a strong justification of resources and gestures to help the migrants.⁷ The sources for each event were triangulated to get to a single media framing score for each single event, which is the unit of statistical analysis. I disaggregate the results by the reporting media ideology in separate analyses.

Table 1. *News sources by destination route.* (R) stands for more conservative; (L) for more progressive.

All news sources			Relevant national news sources		
Italy (Central)	Spain (Western)	Greece (Eastern)	Italy (Central)	Spain (Western)	Greece (Eastern)
Ansa News	Algeria watch	BBC	Il Corriere della Sera (R)	El Mundo (R)	Kathimerini (R)
El Mundo	ABC	Kathimerini	La Repubblica (L)	El Pais (L)	Enet (L)
Fortress Europe	Diario SUR	Hellenic Coast Guard News			
Il Giornale di Sicilia	El Mundo	Hurriyet Daily News			
Il Corriere della Sera	El Pais	Enet			
Le Figaro	La Verdad	Independent			
La Repubblica	Le Monde	Reuters			
Reuters	Le Quotidien d'Oran	The Guardian			
The Guardian	Les Temps d'Algerie	Turkish Daily News			
Times of Malta					

Table 1 reports the main media outlets listed in The Migrants' Files from which the outcome variable was constructed. On the left, all sources cited in the original database are listed. On the right, I list the six mainstream media sources of the articles compared throughout my coding. The selected right and left newspapers tend to report on these events with sustained frequency across ideological lines. In Italy and Spain, the left newspapers presented respectively 44% and 46% of the nationally relevant events; the right newspapers presented more than 26% and 33%. In Greece, right and left news presented 27% and 15% of the events, respectively.

Explanatory variables

My study considers two explanatory variables. To capture humanitarian sufferance of migrants at transit, I constructed a measure of migrant fatalities by counting the number of *Dead & Missing Migrants* per identified event.⁸ In the aggregate, the distribution of this variable is rather sparse, as some events count to 800 victims (Figure 2). To avoid making inference on the extreme events (e.g., those above 200 deaths), and in line with the intuition that events that happen to groups may trigger more sociotropic reactions to a collective (Newman et al., 2013), I dichotomize this measure. Namely, I separate events that have lower and higher rates of migrants' mortality based on the median (4 dead/missing migrants). The resulting variable is *High Number of Dead & Missing Migrants*. This has similar effects if I change the dichotomizing threshold by a few values. Additionally, I present the results with the continuous data as an extra check.

With regards to the second explanatory variable of interest, I constructed a measure of spatial proximity to the location where the migrants are said to be identified. The Migrants' Files provides a way to generate this measure, as the daily events in the dataset are geo-located. This means that for each incident longitude and latitude are provided. The variable *Geographic Distance*, which captures the vicinity of each event to Greece, Italy, and Spain, is set up as a categorical measure ranging across three values. 0 is assigned if the distance between the focal country's capital city and the place where the immigrants were found is less than 500 km (i.e., a relatively close proximity to the recipient country). 1 is assigned if the distance between the capital and the place where the immigrants were found is more than 500 but less than 1000 km. Finally, the value of 2 appears if the distance between the capital city and the place where the immigrants are found is above 1000 km (see Figure 3). For the main analysis, the reference point is set on the capital city for two reasons. First, it is plausible that the main national news outlets operate principally in the national capital. Second, the distance

from the capital to border regions has more political meaning, as shown in other research (Weidmann et al., 2010). For the countries studied in this paper, capital cities are also valid mid-points of proximity to foreign territories, and do not overstate the actual distances between state borders typical of large and irregular states. However, I also show that the results hold if I use a binary measure for whether events happen in domestic waters (i.e., within 12 sea-miles around the coast) versus outside of domestic waters.

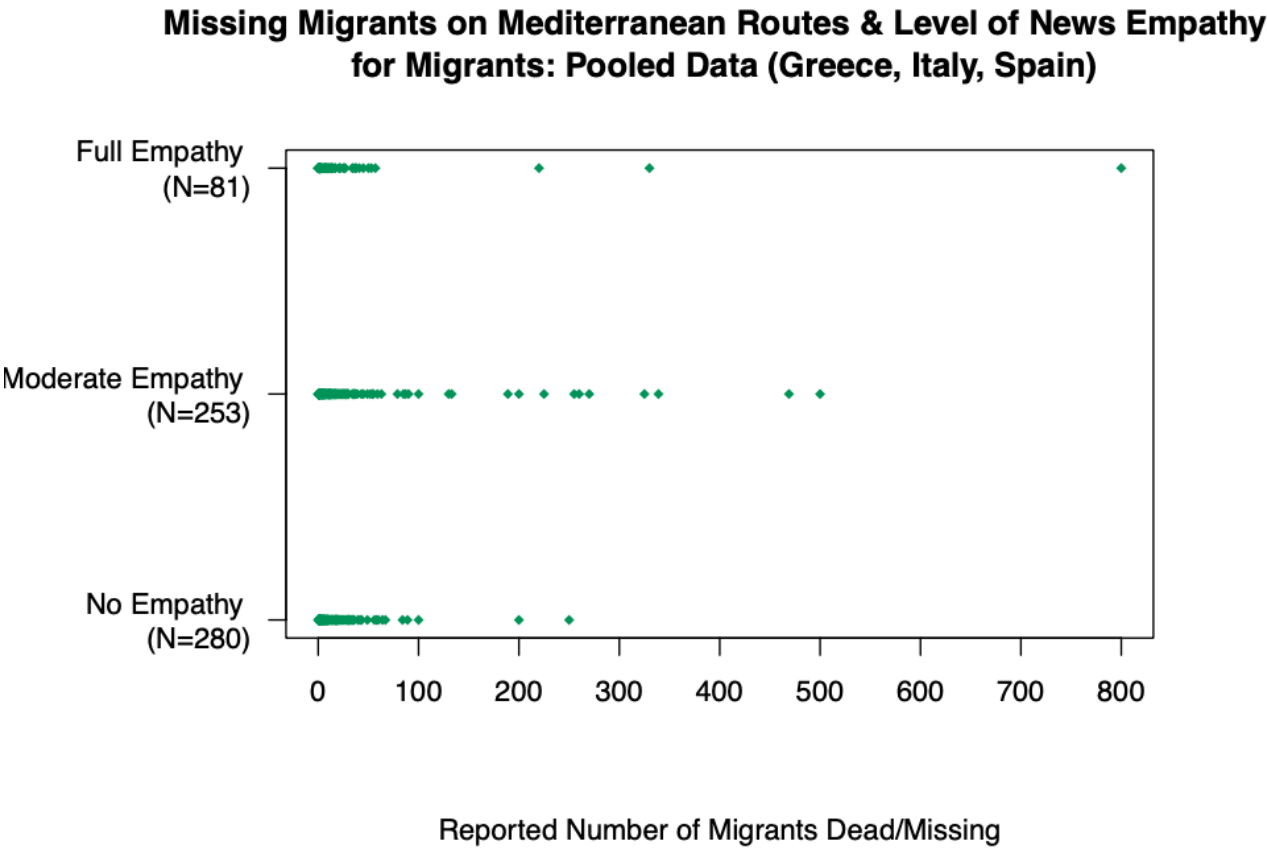


Figure 2. *Dead and Missing Migrants and Level of Empathy for Migrants in the Reporting News.*

Note: Data compiled by the author. The figure illustrates the onset of all the transit events in The Migrants' Files database with functioning web-links from which the reporting articles could be retrieved and the empathy level could be coded. The empathy scales include three values, which correspond respectively to 'no empathy' (0), 'moderate empathy' (1), and 'full empathy' (2).

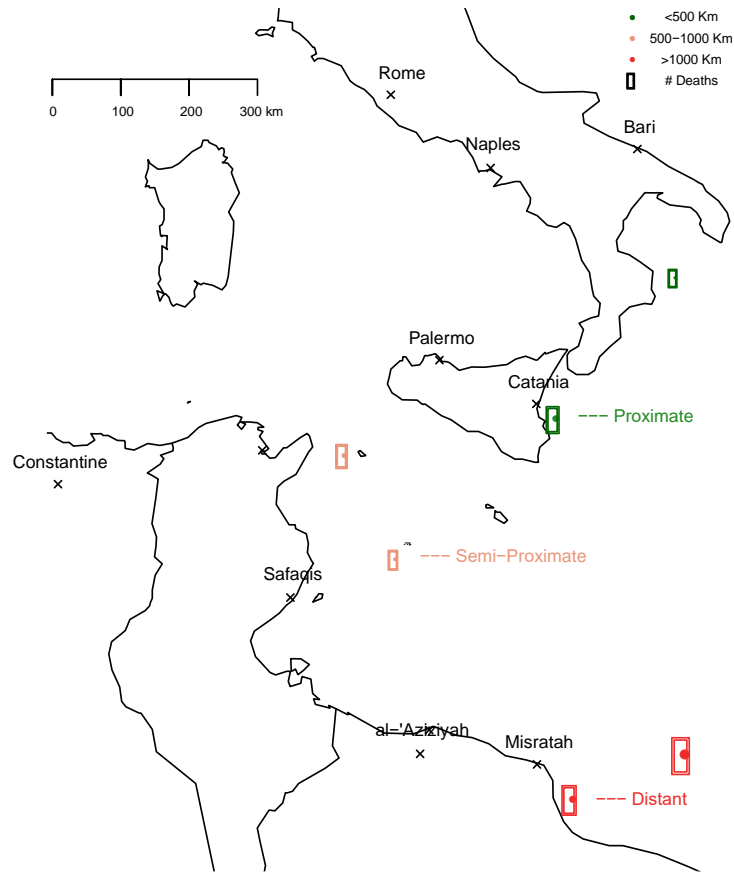


Figure 3. *Dead and Missing Migrants in Space: Illustration of Geocoded Proximity of Migration Events Level of Empathy for Migrants in the Reporting News.*

Note: The figure illustrates, using the case of Italy, the coding of geographic proximity with respect to the location where a deadly transit was identified. Each circle marks the latitude and longitude of an event that occurred in the Central Mediterranean route, while the diameter of each circle varies with the number of missing migrants (see online version for the colored figure).

Results

Given that the outcome of interest, *News Empathy*, is an ordered variable, my main analyses employ an ordered logit specification with country fixed effects and several covariates that include each of the three receiving countries' economic state and events such as elections and terrorist attacks (for details regarding the estimation strategy see the Online appendix).

Table 2 reports the main statistical results. Model 1 presents the estimates from a baseline regression in which I first test the unconditional effects of the two independent variables on levels of news media empathy. The coefficient of *High Number of Dead & Missing Migrants* is highly significant, suggesting a strong correlation between highly fatal migration and news empathy. A high-fatality event decreases the likelihood of 'no empathy' in the news by roughly 20 percentage points and increases the likelihood of 'moderate empathy' by 10 percentage points.⁹ *Geographic Distance*

has no statistically distinguishable effect from zero, meaning that it has no significant unconditional effect on the news framing.

These findings suggest that the magnitude of migrant sufferance triggers, on average, more positive media framing. However, the focal hypothesis of this paper is that geographic proximity mitigates the impact of the information around migrants' human sufferance. Thus, in the rest of Table 2, I estimate models that include the relevant multiplicative term. I find that the coefficient of this interaction is consistently negative and statistically significant. As distance between the national territory and the location of migrant fatalities increases, the media becomes less empathic to migrants. This result holds if I substitute the three-level *Geographic Distance* variable with the binary *Territory: International* (Models 3-4) or the *High Number of Dead & Missing Migrants* with the original continuous variable (Models 5-6). Figure 4 illustrates the relevant interaction effects with coefficient plots.

The results are robust to several sensitivity tests that take into consideration additional control variables and split the data sample by each country and also by time (before and after the first immigration wave that followed the Great Recession). Models that control for media outlet ideology and that include outlet fixed effects also yield equivalent results (see Online appendix). The inference is further buttressed by an inductive evaluation of the news with text-as-data tools reported (see Online appendix).

Altogether, the empirical findings indicate that, while the humanitarian conditions of irregular cross-border migration are a stand-alone explanation for the tone of the reported events, this media effect is moderated by where the detections occur and how far from national territory the migrants are identified. This joint effect is consistent across the immigration-exposed countries studied here. It is noteworthy that the results are stronger for left media although not exclusively driven by these news sources, as the disaggregated results by media ideology suggest (see Online appendix).

Table 2. Main Results. Coefficients from ordered logistic regressions (standard errors in parentheses). The outcome is *News Empathy*. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

	<i>Y: News Empathy</i>					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<i>Transit: High No. Dead & Missing Migrants</i>	0.80*** (0.23)	1.40*** (0.37)	0.83*** (0.23)	1.58*** (0.39)		
<i>Geographic Distance</i>	-0.018 (0.20)	0.22 (0.23)			0.010 (0.20)	0.16 (0.21)
<i>Territory: International</i>			-0.18 (0.33)	0.41 (0.41)		
<i>Transit: No. Dead & Missing Migrants</i>					0.004 (0.003)	0.025** (0.012)
<i>Transit: High No. Dead & Missing Migrants</i> \times <i>Geographic Distance</i>		-0.57** (0.28)				
<i>Transit: High No. Dead & Missing Migrants</i> \times <i>Territory: International</i>				-1.17** (0.49)		
<i>Transit: No. Dead & Missing Migrants</i> \times <i>Geographic Distance</i>						-0.011* (0.006)
<i>National Income Level</i>	0.003 (0.003)	0.003 (0.003)	0.003 (0.003)	0.003 (0.003)	0.004 (0.003)	0.004 (0.003)
<i>National Unemployment Rate</i>	-0.046 (0.035)	-0.048 (0.035)	-0.045 (0.035)	-0.038 (0.035)	-0.048 (0.034)	-0.052 (0.035)
<i>National Elections</i>	-0.48 (1.21)	-0.63 (1.22)	-0.49 (1.21)	-0.71 (1.22)	-0.43 (1.21)	-0.46 (1.21)
<i>Terrorist Attack in Europe</i>	-1.61* (0.86)	-1.60* (0.85)	-1.57* (0.86)	-1.61* (0.85)	-1.41* (0.85)	-1.44* (0.85)
<i>Country dummies</i>	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
N	370	370	370	370	370	370
Pseudo R ²	0.069	0.075	0.070	0.078	0.056	0.061

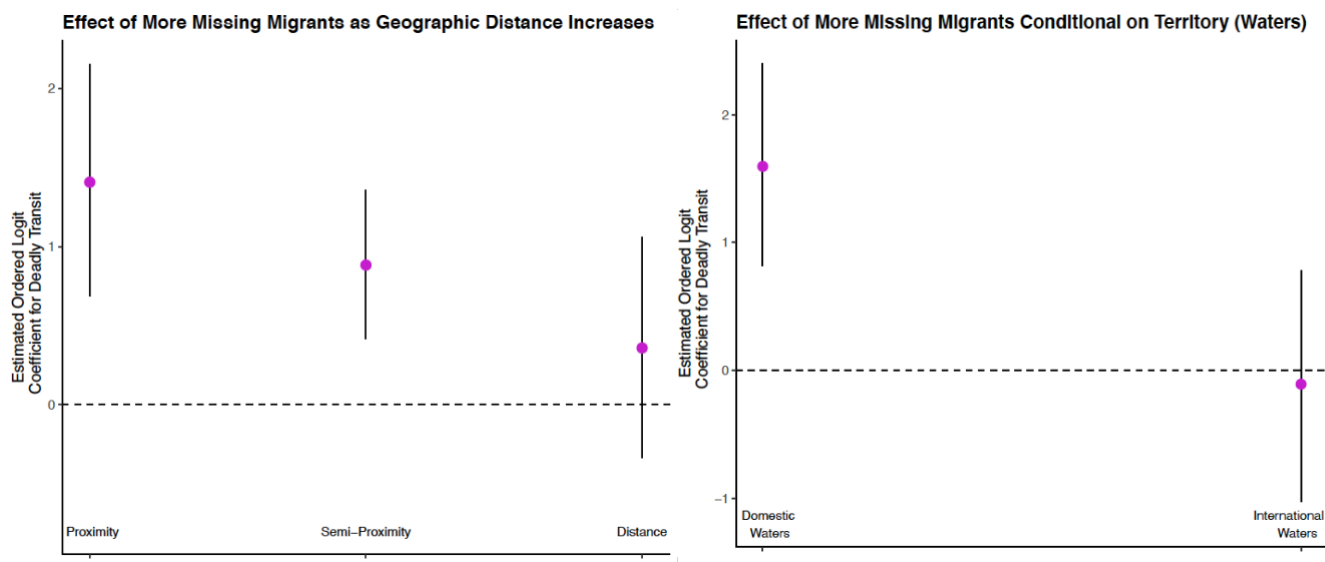


Figure 4. Interaction Plots.

Note: Interaction plots where the moderator is *High # Dead & Missing Migrants* and the changing variable is *Geographic Distance* (left) and *Territory* (right). See Model 2 and Model 4 in Table 2.

Discussion

This short article concentrates on *contextual* characteristics of migration events to explain short-term immigration framing in European media. The focus is on two specific factors: the level of migration sufferance during transit and the geographic vicinity of migrants to recipient domestic communities. I argue that, in the context of sea migration – i.e., boat arrivals in the Mediterranean, media outlets adjust their tone according to the magnitude of migrants’ sufferance and geographic distance. The main hypothesis is that the human sufferance and vulnerability of migrants will increase the sympathy of media stories, *but only* if migrants are in national territories, and not if these are beyond the borders of the recipient country.

Original data on irregular sea migrants’ arrivals and the corresponding media reporting in Southern Europe give support to the hypothesis. While the volume of migrants’ sufferance is positively correlated with a more empathic media framing, this effect decreases significantly if migrants’ deaths are recorded outside of the border of focal European countries. These findings challenge the argument that media will unconditionally color all immigration stories negatively or positively according their ideological point of view. Based on my results, more dramatic stories will shift the tone of immigration narratives across the main media outlets, but this is conditional on them occurring in domestic territory.

More generally, my findings have implications for the study of political communication and the meaning of media narratives for political mobilization around the issue of immigration. In polarized environments, humanitarianism and perspective-taking may be powerful tools to decrease the

politicization of immigration but may only work if immigrants are identified as close to the focal audiences of the media. In other words, the physical proximity may play a significant moderating role in empowering humanitarian stories. While the findings rely on characteristics of the receiving countries in the Southern European context, future work may want to extend the investigation to migration in areas such as the Eastern European border. Furthermore, other maritime spaces, such as the French-British channel with its specific media politics environment, lend themselves to the study of the impact of shipwrecks on media politicization and their spillover effects on public opinion.

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Notes:

¹ See the English version of the article at: <http://www.ekathimerini.com/169260/article/ekathimerini/news/child-among-three-dead-in-rhodes-migrant-wreck> (accessed: May 14, 2023).

² In this Italian article, “clandestine” is used as a synonym of refugee.

³ While generally refugees and migrants have different features with different political implications (Abdelaaty and Steele, 2020), in the context of the migratory flows studied here – i.e., through the Mediterranean sea - it is less important to distinguish between these categories, hence why they are used as synonyms in this article.

⁴ Similarly, conservative media outlets may cater to the public’s fiscal sensitivity, framing migration incidents as a burden if they see public sector resources invested in the assistance of migrants (Magni, 2020).

⁵ While the magnitude of migrants' sufferance at transit and the geographic location of migratory events may be deeply connected, they need not to be endogenous to each other. One can reasonably assume that the migrants' sufferance triggers empathy by generating normative considerations. However, geographic vicinity implies physical closeness, which has realistic - and perhaps even opportunistic – implications for receiving communities (Genovese et al., 2016), which the media tends to focus on.

⁶ In the database, out of 2278 deadly events on the way to Europe, 1704 were reported for the routes in this paper.

⁷ The choice of a three-level ordinal measure is based on the principle of capturing as much variation in the media stories while keeping with cognitively distinguishable categories. The reliability scores suggest a strong internal validity of the coding of media empathy over this ordinal measure (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.692$), which implies discernability across the ordered categories. That said, the ordering between the top two categories is less obvious and in additional results I collapse these two and contrast with the baseline category of no empathy (0). The additional results with the binary outcome variable are consistent with the main results of the paper and can be found in the Appendix.

⁸ These are the number of deceased migrants as reported in the newspaper articles, and not the ones reported by other authorities (e.g., the Ministry of Interior). I assume that the stories reflect numbers of migrants confirmed by the authorities. Ultimately this does not affect the intuition of the paper, as the focus is on the framing of the story.

⁹ In predicted probabilities, a migration incident with more than four fatalities increases the probability of more news empathy from 33% to 49%.

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