

Migration – the crisis imaginary

*On 14 June, hundreds of migrants died after the fishing vessel they were travelling in sank near the Greek town of Pylos. **Lilie Chouliaraki** and **Myria Georgiou** argue the tragedy underlines how terms like “migration crisis” obscure the real victims of Europe’s migration policies.*

The recent shipwreck in open waters near the Greek town of Pylos, with up to 650 migrants feared dead, has reminded us in the most tragic way that Europe’s so-called migration crisis is far from over.

The budget allocated to Greece in the context of the European Border Management Fund saw a 203% increase in 2021-2027 compared to the 2014-2020 period. However, in the words of Apostolos Fotiadis, the programme “[implicitly rewards its deterrence policy](#)”. Indeed, only [0.07% of the 819 million euros in the EU border budget to Greece for 2021-2027](#) was earmarked for search and rescue. This gives some indication of where priorities lie.

Prior to the recent shipwreck, the faltering fishing trawler, packed with as many as 750 women, children and men, was allowed to continue traveling under the claim (by Greek coast guard officials) that its crew members “[turned down offers of assistance](#)”. Evidently, as Catherine Woollard suggests, the priority in border management seems to be to continue “[keeping people out rather than saving lives](#)” in order to avoid yet another “migration crisis” in the Mediterranean.

In light of this logic, the common use of the term “[migration crisis](#)” should be reconsidered as it is more than a mere act of naming. The word “crisis” here does important ideological work in that it does not simply describe the facts about migration but cumulatively advances a whole semantic framework for thinking and talking about it.

The crisis imaginary

In a [new book](#), we call this framework a “crisis imaginary” and argue that it presents

migration as a sudden, shocking and unmanageable event that puts “us” in Europe under pressure. We also note that it nurtures a view of migration as an exclusively western concern, centred around the threatening mobility of non-western people towards the global North.

In so doing, the crisis imaginary shapes migration as a security emergency, migrants as uncontrollable “waves” that need to be “kept at bay” and western publics as potential “victims” that need to be protected – whether from migrant violence (terrorism or sexual violence) or from their cultural “otherness”. As we demonstrate through quantitative and qualitative analysis of press and television news content from eight countries, European media sustained this imaginary by using strategies of generalisation to narrate migrants as massive flows of people rather than as individuals with histories of war violence, persecution or poverty.

This is what David Shariatmadari calls the “[toxic metaphors of the migration debate](#)”, which include, among others, David Cameron’s “[swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean](#)”, the Daily Mail’s “[tidal wave of migrants](#)”, the Daily Express referring to a migration “[flood](#)” and, more recently, [Suella Braverman’s remarks](#) about an “invasion” of “small boats”.

European media have also used strategies of vilification, with migrants and refugees largely cast as terrorists and [the spread of terrorism viewed as a direct geopolitical consequence of the migration “crisis”](#). This was especially the case following the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks when there were [allegations](#) that one of the attackers had posed as a Syrian refugee to enter Europe.

Even in cases where the media storytelling has thrown a spotlight on the dire realities facing migrants at Europe’s sea borders, such as the “[heartbreaking](#)” [drowning of Syrian toddler Aylan Kurdi back in 2015](#) (and plenty of tragic events since), events have often been narrated through a sentimental lens of pity, portraying the “crisis” as a humanitarian tragedy that Europe is moved by but can do nothing about.

Invisibilities

The crisis imaginary is, in this sense, a convenient narrative for western governments, which have used the language of “massive flows” and “terrorism” to distract attention

from the real and complex challenges of global migration.

First, it helps to obscure the systemic politico-economic conditions that lead to migration from the global South in the first place – conditions that western governments are not only aware of but actively involved in, such as the long-term conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan and the environmental catastrophe caused by and profiting the global North.

Second, it leaves unquestioned long-lasting political disagreements on [managing migrant quotas among EU countries](#). These disagreements have resulted in growing numbers of migrants being stacked in countries of arrival, such as Greece and Italy, especially at a time when they were facing strong pressure by the European Commission and the IMF to make severe budget cuts.

Third, the crisis imaginary perpetuates the “young male Muslim-as-terrorist” stereotype and obstructs a more complex exploration of the causes of terrorism in Europe. Most perpetrators have been homegrown EU nationals already known to the authorities, as reaffirmed by the [profiles](#) of those reported to have carried out the Paris terrorist attacks. Yet, the fear of the “alien” or “invading” “other” serves better the West’s security agendas, borrowing from and feeding into racist and exclusionary discourses of far-right populism.

Legitimising the illegitimate

The racialised imaginary of the migration “crisis” not only renders the failures of EU migration policies invisible but also serves to legitimatise the grim realities that they produce for migrants and refugees. Back in 2015-2020, for instance, Greece became Europe’s notorious face of the “crisis”.

Operating under the pressures of severe austerity and budget cuts while lacking the necessary support, infrastructure and resources to effectively manage the migrant registration process, Greece largely operated as “[a dumping ground for the men, women, and children that the European Union has failed to protect](#)”. These people were hosted in so-called European “hotspots” and “shelters”, such as the Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos.

Before being set on fire by desperate migrants in September 2020, the Moria camp was

effectively a detention centre with overcrowded tents, insufficient toilets, showers, medical care, and food. It was, as Deutsche Welle branded it, a [“hell on earth”](#) where migrants did not live but barely survived.

Under the grip of the crisis imaginary, such detention centres appear completely legitimate. They have largely remained hidden from public view, beyond the reach of political discourse and news coverage. They are invisible “death-worlds” existing alongside “our” everyday realities as a price worth paying for “our” security. This is also true of the ongoing pushbacks of migrant vessels at [Europe’s sea borders](#), which cost hundreds of lives each year – only the worst of which are reported in the news, if at all.

According to the International Organisation for Migration, since 2014, [27,629 people have died in the Mediterranean](#) while travelling to Europe. Alongside these [deaths in the Mediterranean](#), brave investigative reporting about the horrendous conditions under which [migrants today live in the UK, France and elsewhere](#) reminds us that the crisis imaginary is just as much about revealing and legitimising migration as a threat as it is about hiding the human rights violations of migrants and refugees that European countries perform.

The imaginary of migration as a crisis presents a Eurocentric and xenophobic perception of transnational mobility as a problem for the West while obfuscating the real victims: those migrants and refugees who flee war, persecution, poverty and climate change, risking their lives to reach supposedly safe but ultimately cruel and harmful destinations. The crisis imaginary effectively reserves mobility, a constitutive condition of the modern world, as a right only of the global North, recognising western citizens alone as legitimate cross-border travellers while treating all others as alien threats that need to be deterred, detained or left to die.

For more information, see the authors’ latest book, [The Digital Border: Migration, Technology, Power](#) (New York University Press, 2022)

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Netfalls Remy Musser/Shutterstock.com](#)
