

## **SLIPPERY discourses of intertwined crises migration and Covid-19 pandemic in a postcolonial nation**

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### **Abstract**

*The outbreak of a pandemic inevitably links with migration as containment measures usually involve the closure of borders. In the Portuguese context, mediated discourses of these intertwined crises were varied and multifaceted, reflecting the country's postcolonial peculiarity as both a provider of emigrants and host country to distinct fluxes of migrants. Through a qualitative analysis of selected items published in Portuguese newspapers Expresso, Diário de Notícias, and Correio da Manhã, I will show how similar issues involving Portuguese emigrants and distinct groups of migrants have been differently framed in news items related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The aim is to discuss how this unstable coverage speaks to, and collides with, the deep social imaginary of Portuguese emigration and the widespread idea of a Lusophone space characterized by the harmonious conviviality of different people. I argue that the fragmented frames represent a symptom of crisis themselves, revealing unsettled discourses and alternating anxieties.*

### **Keywords**

*news framing, crises, coloniality of migration, Covid-19, Portugal.*

## Introduction

In a globalized world, the most effective way to contain the spread of disease is to limit the movement of people within and between borders. Accordingly, many nations dealt with the Covid-19 pandemic as a mobility issue (Tsagkroni, Alencar & Skleparis, 2022) But there is also a more subtle relation between the binomial migration/mobility and epi/pandemics. To turn the “invisible other” into a visible and palpable threat, people usually make sense of a new virus by materializing it as an invader, immigrant, or enemy (de Rosa & Mannarini, 2020).

Social psychology research pointed out that othering processes are a usual response to risks and threats (Mannarini et al., 2020). Much as other general defense mechanisms, othering helps to control anxiety while confirming identities and underlying world views. These processes are pervasive and when discursively constructed security issues overlap, the imaginaries and hierarchies that sustain them are fueled. The outbreak of Covid-19 brought a new grammar around security in correlation with the disease to the media and political discourses worldwide – the recurrent use of the words “combat”, “war”, and “enemy”, among other vocabulary (Santos & Santos, 2021). Thus, especially in the first months of 2020, the unknown Covid-19 and well-known outgroups were associated with each other in several countries (de Rosa et al., 2021).

Notwithstanding the adoption of health protocols by governments and the proliferation of othering processes, Covid-19 made clear that material and immaterial borders could be erected, closed, or hardened, albeit they remained biologically porous. As some literature had predicted centuries ago, “The pathogen breaks through, and borders shrink from countries, to cities, to towns, to villages, to your own house, your own room (...)” (Crawford, 2023).

Unsurprisingly, Covid-19 was characterized as a ‘world crisis’; mobility issues therefore were perceived as a prominent risk to its containment. This characterization emerged against the backdrop of migration phenomena which have been framed as a crisis since at least 2015. In such an uncertain and volatile environment, which is arguably structural to post-traditional societies, news media – viewed as a key discursive arena through which ideas, opinions, and feelings are constructed as significant – plays a critical role in influencing public understanding of crises (Moore et al., 2018).

Such an influence was especially notorious at the beginning of the pandemic, with legacy media deemed fundamental by audiences worldwide who felt an increased necessity for reliable information (Newman et al., 2020). The intense mediation of security measures and discourses related to Covid-19 had undeniable consequences in public attitudes towards migration and their associated processes, exacerbating the rights and vulnerabilities of migrants. As research conducted in several countries has demonstrated (Serafini et al., 2023; Tsagkroni et al., 2022; de Rosa et al., 2021), media discourses related to Covid-19 and migration were diverse. On one hand, they facilitated a cosmopolitan response and solidarity movements towards migrants, and on the other hand, they reinforced out-group blaming and stigmatization, thus stimulating anti-migrant mobilizations.

Due to its unique characteristics, the Covid-19 pandemic made clear modernity's historical character as a perpetual crisis-condition (Frosh & Georgiou, 2022). It reoriented the perception of risk, fear, and threat towards a cosmopolitan response without eradicating othering processes and outgroup blaming, namely those directed at migrants (Serafini et al., 2023). Furthermore, migration presents itself as a continually contested and reinvented concept, contingent upon the multiple – local and transnational – contexts where the discussion unfolds (Moore, 2015).

I propose to broaden and deepen the discussion on the mediated discourses on the Covid-19 pandemic and migration by analyzing their coverage in the Portuguese news media. Through selection and qualitative analysis of news items published in three national newspapers between 2020 and 2021, the study aims to answer the following questions: how were distinct migratory issues – Portuguese emigration, immigration from different origins, and the movements within the scope of forced migration – framed in items about the pandemic? Accordingly, were these migratory issues/subjects differently framed in items about similar topics?

Portugal is an interesting case study when it comes to the discussion of news frames regarding distinct types of migration precisely because it is historically and culturally marked by emigration. Conversely, since the decolonization process in the 1970's, it has also witnessed the arrival of distinct fluxes of migrants. Further complicating matters, Luso-Tropicalism, an imperial ideology that emphasizes a supposed benevolence of the Portuguese colonizer towards people from the colonies, remains an everlasting legacy with a strong impact on a post-colonial social reality where migrants are mainly from former Portuguese colonies (Warwick et al., 2019).

Utilizing decolonial, (mediated) collective memory, and framing theory epistemologies for the analysis of news coverage and linking it with the theoretical discussion around the concept of 'crisis', in the following sections I will argue why and how the fragmented and conflicting news frames identified in my analysis are a symptom of crisis themselves.

The news frames in focus here expose the political power struggles involved in the establishment of migratory memory cultures (Wagner & Seufferling, 2020), thus revealing how framing processes are inextricably related to the social construction of meaning. Moreover, they highlight how in periods of crisis, the elite consensus around issues usually collapses (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). To conclude, I will discuss if the visibility brought by the intersecting Covid-19 and migration to conflicts already latent in Portugal could be oriented towards political and social change.

## **The characterization of crisis**

Koselleck and Richter (2006) observed that the concept of crisis, once an unequivocal and clear concept, had become a vague concept to fit the uncertainties of whatever might be favoured at a given moment. They argued that the lack of clarity around the

use of the term 'crisis' would be a symptom of historical crisis itself. The authors also pointed towards the role of the media in the inflation of the use of the word, with 'crisis' being "(...) often used interchangeably with 'unrest', 'conflict', 'revolution', and to describe vaguely disturbing moods or situations" (p. 399).

As the idea of 'crisis' settled as a permanent fixture of the modern era, Frosh and Georgiou (2022) theorize that the Covid-19 pandemic characterized itself as a culturally produced global phenomenon, whose cultural construction as a crisis relied mainly on the representational work of media. Broadening the analysis, I advance that both the Covid-19 pandemic and migration embody crises that have been culturally constructed. Their cultural dimension is already evident in the mere act of characterizing both as 'crisis', which leads to creating objects of knowledge and developing protocols for action.

However, conceding the status of 'crisis' for migration, especially migration to Europe, is less consensual. From 2015 on, the arrival of people mainly from Africa and the Middle East seeking sanctuary in Europe began to be publicly read as a 'crisis' in European media and politics. That phenomenon was not only understood as a humanitarian emergency concerning the treacherous journeys of migrants but also as a crisis *for* and experienced *by* Europe (Moore et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, the wealthy countries of the European continent taking in the largest share of refugees did not experience an economic crisis. Furthermore, the inflated media coverage of people arriving in Europe do not correspond to the reality of the statistics. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, of the five countries hosting the largest numbers of refugees, only one is in Europe – Germany (UNHCR, n.d.). Indeed, longitudinal analysis of the numbers of refugee migration did not detect a long-term increase in its global intensity (Fransen & de Haas, 2022).

Arguably, the 'migration crisis' can be thought of as a manufactured crisis (Serafini et al., 2023) or simply a crisis in the normative white national population of European countries, rhetorically constructed on an ideological level (Rodríguez, 2018). The latter explanation is endorsed by the warm welcome towards Ukrainian refugees, encouraged by a media framing of Ukrainian nationals as 'people like us' (Georgiou & Troszyński, 2023). They are not read as ethnically, racially, and culturally distinct from European populations.

I contend that the 'migration crisis' is foremost a crisis for migrants themselves. The concept of 'crisis' remains powerful since it reveals the undercurrents of everyday life and its socio-political formations (Frosh & Georgiou, 2022). In doing so, it highlights the dichotomy of crisis as visible and invisible phenomena. As Chouliaraki and Georgiou (2022) explain, the common use of the term 'migration crisis' is not a mere act of naming. The use of the word 'crisis' achieves an important ideological point by establishing and reinforcing a semantic framework in which migration is thought of and referred to as an unmanageable event, as well as an exclusive European concern.

Whether or not the migration phenomenon is perceived as a crisis for Europe, this has not been the case in Portugal. The latest assessment put the country in the 20<sup>th</sup> spot

on the European Union (EU) countries list with the highest number of refugees (Oliveira, 2022). Just 6.7% of the population in Portugal has an immigrant status (Eurostat, 2023). On the other hand, Portugal has 2.6 million emigrants and a total population of around 10 million people living within its borders (Pena Pires et al., 2021).

At the beginning of the 'migration crisis', Portuguese society demonstrated a sympathetic position towards refugees, with rescues made by Portuguese police in the Mediterranean being frequently in the news (Silva, 2019). News media reflected the receptive stance to refugees expressed by the government, framing Portugal's solicitude in opposition with the uncompromised stance of other European countries (Torkington & Ribeiro, 2019). More a convenience than a conviction, the government's position represented an opportunity to demonstrate its alignment with the principle of European solidarity. It also envisaged a way of obtaining human resources to boost economy and combat demographic deficit (Costa & Sousa, 2017).

The idea of the 'migration crisis' is a convenient narrative for western governments, rendering obscure the real and complex challenges of global migration, driven by structural political and economical conditions (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2022). It is not a coincidence that patterns in global refugee migration indicate a concentration of recurrent conflict cycles in a reduced number of countries (Fransen & de Haas, 2022).

## Mediated memory cultures of migration

From the outset of the maritime exploration in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and expansion of the Portuguese presence outside its European borders, emigration became a "structural constant" in Portuguese society (Godinho, 1978). However, this portrait underwent significant variations in the 1970's, in consequence of the independence of Portuguese colonies in Africa and the arrival of people from those countries to the former metropolis (Bento et al., 2011). In the following decades, immigration further consolidated with influx mostly from Brazil and Eastern European countries, while emigration decreased. Currently, Portugal is characterized as simultaneously a country of emigration and immigration (Peixoto et al., 2016).

Although nationals from the former colonies represent the major migrant group in Portugal, past years have witnessed an increase in immigrant numbers from the United Kingdom (UK) and India. They are among the most represented foreign communities in the country (SEFSTAT, n.d.). While mobility from the UK has been boosted by Brexit, lifestyle motivations, and the existence of an attractive fiscal policy in Portugal, immigration from India – but also from other South Asian countries, is eminently economic (Fonseca et al., 2021; Montezuma & McGarrigle, 2019).

The imagery of emigration remains deeply rooted in Portugal, with emigrants assuming the symbolic role previously incorporated by the colonies after the end of the Portuguese empire in 1974. This new position was associated with a social imaginary that since

the 16<sup>th</sup> century has prolonged the Portuguese spatial unity beyond the borders of the country (Feldman-Bianco, 1995). So, with decolonization came a demand to reinvent the Portuguese mythical past and to (re)create compensatory spaces to maintain the continuity with the transnational character of the colonial period.

Rising from being called ‘second-class citizens’ during the dictatorship, emigrants rose to the symbolic position of guarantors of the transnational character of Portuguese identity. The actions of the Portuguese state, which included the association of the image of Luís de Camões – author of the 15<sup>th</sup>-century epic poem *Os Lusíadas* – with an “immigrant Portugal”, and the alteration of the citizenship law from the principle of *jus soli* to *jus sanguini* – sought to sustain the imaginary on the greatness of a country that no longer had colonies but kept marking its presence in the world through its emigrants (Lourenço, 1992).

Amidst this deep imagery around emigration, there is a widespread idea of a Lusophone space characterized by the harmonious conviviality of different countries and people as the result of decades of government propaganda of the (quasi) theory Luso-Tropicalism (Abadia et al., 2018). Developed by the Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre, the Portuguese dictatorship regime adopted Luso-Tropicalism to circumvent public pressure for the independence of colonized territories in the aftermath of World War II (Warwick et al., 2019). Valuing a supposed exceptionality in the relationship between the Portuguese and people from the ‘tropics’, Luso-Tropicalism advocated a fundamental difference between Portuguese and Northern European colonialism. Furthermore, it would attest the country’s role as the inventor of human rights (Jerónimo & Monteiro, 2020).

As an example of “intercolonial narcissism”, in which all colonial powers want to see their colonialism, slavery, and/or discrimination as better than their competitors (Santos & Schor, 2012), Luso-Tropicalism continues to be appropriated by politicians to maintain *status quo*. Accordingly, Portuguese people and Lusophone immigrants reproduce some of its prevailing ideas. Expectably though, not everyone of the latter feels that the Lusophone space is nourished by racial equality (Abadia et al., 2018). Positioned far from the core whiteness, usually ascribed to people from Northern European countries (Baker, 2021), Portuguese society defines itself as tendentially white, and immune to racism – an idea directly linked to Luso-Tropicalism.

The hegemony of the Luso-Tropicalism imaginary, based on a successful ideological strategy to establish intertwined diasporic and postcolonial memory cultures, expectably benefitted from the news media’s input. There are many recent examples of how journalism has addressed Portuguese society’s past, present, and future through memory work (as discussed by Tenenboim-Weinblatt & Neiger, 2019): from the framing of Portugal’s solicitude in counter position with the uncompromised stance of other European countries during the so-called ‘refugee crisis’, which resembled the rhetoric of the Portuguese dictatorship in the 1960’s (Cunha, 2017); to the framing of Portuguese emigration to Brazil

during the economic crisis of 2008, which established a dialogue with specific hegemonic representations of Portuguese emigrants forged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Minga, 2020).

Overall, the presence of migrants in Portuguese news media is low. The Portuguese Regulatory Authority for the Media (ERC) counted the appearance of immigrants, refugees, and members of the Roma community in only 4% of TV news items between 2018 and 2019, and immigrants and refugees were mainly represented in adverse situations such as poverty, criminalization or victimization (ERC, 2021). I will show that a “coloniality of migration”, as an analytical framework for the migration regulation of the ‘Other’ (Rodríguez, 2018), also emerges in the Portuguese media discourse on migrants. This framework is done through management devices based on subtle but persistent racial classification, despite all rhetoric of immunity to racism.

## Methodological design

To comparatively analyze how Portuguese news media covered issues and occurrences involving migrants during the Covid-19 pandemic, I used news media framing analysis as the methodological approach of the study. As such, I assumed the theoretical perspective that all communication is selective (Baden, 2019), and that framing processes are inherently involved in the social construction of meaning.

In that context, mass-mediated communication, and specifically journalism, emerges as privileged ground where the struggle for hegemony of those meanings can be better observed (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). Therefore, to connect with the larger theoretical framework of the study and highlight the ideologies and power dynamics involved in the framing of migrant issues and subjects, I sought to establish a bridge between the theoretical perspectives of the concept of crisis, framing theory, decoloniality, and collective memory in the predominantly qualitative analysis of the selected items.

I selected the mainstream newspapers *Expresso* (E) and *Diário de Notícias* (DN), and the tabloid *Correio da Manhã* (CM). Although Portuguese newspapers traditionally avoid a political profile, E and DN lean to a liberal-conservative orientation, while in CM there is a prevalence of elements of populism (Salgado, 2019). All of them are among the outlets most consumed by the Portuguese audience. CM achieves the highest number in print circulation, but also the lowest score in brand trust (Cardoso, Paisana & Pinto-Martinho, 2022). I focused on nation-wide press, given their potentially greater influence in shaping the coverage of other media, therefore shaping and conditioning policy and political communication processes, as well as guiding public understanding of hot topics such as migration (Moore et al., 2018).

Within the period between 2020 and 2021 – peak of Covid-19 cases and lockdown measures in Portugal – I searched for the terms ‘emigration’ and ‘emigrants’, ‘immigrants’ and ‘immigration’, ‘refugees’ and ‘asylum seekers’, and ‘residents’ (*boolean search*) in CM’s content available in Nexis database, and separately for the same terms in E and DN web-

sites.<sup>1</sup> I filtered all items related to the Covid-19 pandemic, excluding duplicate news items, migration news outside Portuguese context and news items where migration was not the main topic. All types of texts were included apart from editorials and readers' letters. The final sample group contained 30 items from DN, 62 from E, and 85 from CM.

In the initial stage of analysis, it became clear that the three outlets followed a similar pattern regarding the coverage of migration and Covid-19. While a significant number of news items related to Portuguese emigrants (with the slight exception of DN), most of the coverage on immigrants and asylum seekers/refugees were assembled around three subgroups of items, corresponding to specific-issue occurrences. The first event on 27 March 2020 reported on the Portuguese government's decision to legalize the status of all migrants who had pending permanent residency requests in the Portuguese immigration and borders service – a measure it would extend twice. The second occurrence focused on outbreaks of Covid-19 at Lisbon-based hostels sheltering asylum seekers in May 2020. Similarly, the third event also concerned an outbreak of Covid-19 among immigrant agricultural workers in Odemira village one year later. In both outbreaks, the lack of appropriate living conditions propelled the spread of infection among migrants living in overcrowded places.

While the total number of DN items matched this division in subgroups ( $n=30$ ), in E 55 items were divided among the subgroups, while the remaining seven items were about: news items on immigration issues and Covid-19 which did not merit a follow-up (4); and stigmatizing concerns of the Chinese community in Portugal (3). In the third media outlet, CM, 77 items were inserted in one of the subgroups, and the remaining eight items were also about unconnected immigration issues.

Going back to E's four news items with no follow-up, two are interestingly classified under the topic of 'economy' – "Higher education institutions anticipate reduction in the number of foreign students" (Leiria, 2020), and "Digital nomads of the Covid-19 era have been a lifeline for local accommodation – in Algarve 'it's already become a fashion'" (Antunes, 2021).<sup>2</sup> It is noteworthy that those news items do not refer to migrants as 'immigrants', as they are about international students and digital nomads. As such, the focus of the news items is not an imminently economic migration, which is usually associated with the term 'immigrant' (Kunz, 2019). Turning the analysis to CM's eight remaining news items, three report outbreaks of infection among immigrant agricultural workers across the country. Of note again, the problem of inappropriate living conditions was not circumscribed to the southern region of the country, where Odemira's village is located.

I divided the items into the subgroups for each newspaper, according to the table below, and focused the analysis on them.



Newspapers	Emi-grants	Legal status	Hostels case	Zmar case	Non-connected	Chinese comm.	Total
<i>Diário de Notícias</i>	9	4	7	10	0	0	30
<i>Expresso</i>	17	6	16	16	4	3	62
<i>Correio da Manhã</i>	38	7	20	12	8	0	85

A framing analysis was developed for each subgroup, using the news item as the unit of analysis. I relied on Entman's (1993) classic definition of framing and its conceptualization by Matthes and Kohring (2008). Namely the qualitative analysis was done by: 1. identifying and coding key themes (problem definition); 2. detect causal interpretations, specifically success or failure; 3. assess moral evaluations that could be positive, negative, or neutral; 4. analyze recommendations that could include a call for, or against certain action(s). The codification was executed within the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA.

The frame elements could all be present or not in each news item. Similarly, one single news item could have more than one frame element of the same type (for example: one text could show both causal explanations for an occurrence in terms of success or failure, as they were articulated by different actors). The analysis was inherently qualitative but guided by the mentioned frame elements. So, frames emerge as clusters of frame elements within this conceptualization (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). I elected functional specifications for defining frames as they are preferable to draw clearer inferences (Entman, Matthes & Pellicano, 2014).

I employed other codes to deepen my analysis. Namely on the hostels case subgroup, I also coded the names used when referring to migrants, as well as the actors quoted in the news items. Inspired by the methodology of the Global Media Monitoring Project (Macharia, 2020), the latter were distributed among the following codes: off-the-record, popular opinion (their quotes reflect the opinions of the 'common citizen'), subject (when the news item is about them), specialist (their quotes express specialized knowledge), spokesperson (who speaks in the name of a group or organization), state spokesperson (they speak in the name of the government), and collective entity (e.g.: 'the state', 'the government', etc.). The interest in deepening the analysis of these subgroup relies on critically comparing two distinct moments of news coverage: the 'migration crisis' around 2015, and the outbreaks of Covid-19 among asylum seekers in 2020.

As Torkington and Ribeiro (2018) show, the Portuguese coverage of the former differed from the international press since being "a 'peripheral' European country which felt no direct impact from the unfolding humanitarian crisis, Portugal was clearly seeking to bolster a positive self-representation as a tolerant, welcoming and inclusive society" (p. 1). Consequently, one of my goals was to observe how the newspapers framed an event concerning forced migration occurring on Portuguese soil, and in the context of a global pandemic, as opposed to media coverage on a broader European context.

The selection and coding work was conducted by a single researcher. This inevitably poses some risks, not the least arbitrariness, since worldviews of the researcher can seep into the interpretation of the news discourse (Tankard, 2001). To minimize this threat, the coding was repeated at three different points in time.

## Findings and Discussion

Following the chronological order of the occurrences, I start by analyzing the subgroup of 'emigrants' separately and discussing the general panorama revealed by the inquiry, before moving to a fine-grained analysis.

### *Legalization*

The 'legalization' subgroup has the smallest number of news items dedicated to the topic. As mentioned, the Portuguese government was one of the first among European countries in legalizing all migrants during the pandemic. Such a move might have led to prompting a self-congratulatory discourse from the governmental actors and potentially could have prompted a critical rebuke from actors on the political far-right. However, that ended up not being the case. Instead, congratulatory frames were constructed around the selection and emphasis of positive evaluations by international institutional partners and actors.

For example, one item of E has the following quote in the title: "It is in Lisbon where the new Europe is born" (Cordeiro, 2020, March 30). The phrase was shared by the Italian author Roberto Saviano in his Facebook profile. The same item also reproduced the appeal (call for action) of the then Minister of Internal Affairs, which was transcribed by Saviano: "Guaranteeing free access to health and social security, supporting job stability and the right to housing is the duty of a caring society in times of crisis".

Joining this congratulatory frame, there is also one news item of DN – "Pandemic made migrants more vulnerable. Portugal is highlighted for support measures" (Neves, 2021, September 4) – about the release of a report from the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Similarly, an item of CM (Lusa, 2021, January 13), originally put out by the Portuguese state-owned news agency *Lusa*, highlights the positive references to the country in a report released by Human Rights Watch.

Notwithstanding the existence of such a frame, most news items in this subgroup offer a neutral frame. By exposing the concerns of migrant associations, these news items carry a mix of neutral, negative, and positive moral evaluations, praising the new law, but also advocating for its expansion. Since the legalization only encompassed those who had already initiated their official request for residency, spokespersons of migrant associations claimed that the legal measures taken by the government should be broad enough to protect all vulnerable migrants.

It is worth noting an interview of news agency *Lusa* with the then High Commissioner for Migration, Sónia Pereira (2020, July 1). Published by CM, in “Access to rights for migrants is ‘important beyond the pandemic’, says High Commissioner for Migration”, Pereira presented the following neutral evaluation in regards to concerns by migrant associations: “I don’t think it’s right to think that there are many people who may have been left out of this regime’, she believes, although admits there may be ‘some issue with those who arrived after’. (...)”.

Despite the far-reaching governmental measures, the initial coverage was limited: only six news items in March 2020, with a total of 17 in this subgroup for the whole period of analysis (2020-2021). Portugal was not an outlier, as a similar pattern was observed in Italy when the government discussed, and later approved, the regularization of 600.000 migrants between March and April of 2020 (Serafini et al. 2023).

Under normal circumstances, such a measure would raise a wave of protests from right-wing parties and intense news media coverage (idem). Nevertheless, the sudden rise of the Covid-19 crisis produced a “displacement effect” in which the pandemic became the main newsworthy topic. Thus, “(...) the (unexpected) Covid crisis, bursting into both people’s lives and among the topics covered by the newspapers, did not leave more room for the migration crisis” (Serafini et al., 2023, p. 6).

### **Hostels case**

In the subgroup of news items reporting on migrants in hostels, the prevalence of frame elements promoted by institutional sources meant that the causal interpretation for the failure in health prevention and security – the key theme of this subgroup – was attributed to the increase of asylum claims in recent years and not to the lack of appropriate management and care for people who were under protection of the Portuguese state. Even though in reality Portugal received only 1540 asylum requests in 2021, up from 440 in 2014 (Oliveira 2022).

The use by CM of a statement’s excerpt from the Portuguese Refugee Council (CPR) is especially revealing in this regard. The news item claims the rise of asylum claims had provoked “the overcrowding of CPR centers, leading to the necessity to resort to external accommodation (‘hostels’, rented flats and rooms), which is also increasingly overcrowding and does not always guarantee the desirable conditions” (Lusa, 2020, May 2). In short, CM used the excerpt by CPR to lend legitimacy to its claim.

In this subgroup, members and spokespersons of the government and NGO’s spokespersons were the predominantly quoted sources. Although the CPR is a non-governmental organization (NGO), it is a recognized partner of the UNHCR and the Portuguese government for the management of asylum claims and refugee support. More significant, in my view, is that no asylum seeker was quoted in the news items. This could be justified by the pandemic context and the fact they were under quarantine. Nevertheless, as only

those who were legally responsible for them were heard, it became convenient to advance their own preferred frame of the situation.

Only one news item highlighted the lack of accountability of the actors involved in the asylum claims' management, emphasizing it in the title: "The hostel, the asylum seekers, the Covid-19 and the game of push responsibilities to each other" (Câncio, 2020, April 23). Accordingly, the only 'specialist' and 'personal experience' coded within this subgroup are in the abovementioned news item. More specifically, the quotations coded as 'personal experience' refer to previous reviews of hostels' guests published on a website that were transcribed by the journalist.

Calls for action to prevent similar situations from happening again (treatment recommendation) came from the same actors: governmental actors and experts. These same actors shared intentions for new measures and policies, such as building new asylum centers, decentralize housing of refugees across the country and similar actions.

Overall, the seven news items reporting on migrants confined in hostels due to a Covid-19 outbreak which appeared on the DN featured neutral or negative evaluations. However, of the six negative evaluations identified, five are shared by different actors interviewed in the news item reported by Câncio (2020, April 23).

Regarding the vocabulary used when referring to the subjects of the news items, the most common words employed were 'migrants', 'people', 'asylum seekers', and 'refugees'. One item from E and two from DN pointed out that they were predominantly men from Africa, the generalizing and conflating terminology identified in the coverage of the hostels quarantine, where some references to refugees' origins and gender seems to subtly put forth the "(...) dichotomy of civilization and barbarity, constructing black and brown racialized masculinities as 'premodern,' lacking control over their sexuality" (Rodríguez, 2018, p. 17). However, in most news items there was no geographical identification associated with the labels 'migrants', 'people', 'asylum seekers', and 'refugees'.

Arguably, the terminology was not used appropriately in most of the news items. Confusion of terms was prevalent in all newspapers, with sometimes the terms 'refugee' and 'asylum seekers' interchangeably in the same headline, despite some news items explaining these people were claiming asylum in Portugal and waiting for the conclusion of their residency requests.

The lack of accurate vocabulary is notably prevalent in the tabloid newspaper, CM, which employs almost exclusively only one frame element: problem definition. Their coverage of the hostels quarantine event was characterized by a sensationalist presentation of the items' key themes without providing any causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation. Only the tabloid demonstrated an explicit sensationalist tone with the use of these terms, with headlines such as: "Infected refugees removed from hostel in Lisbon" (Curado, 2020, May 2), and "Coronavirus-infected rioters leave Ota airbase and go towards Loures" (Curado, 2020, May 16). The rioters mentioned in the title above related with a disturbance at an airbase where the migrants were in quarantine.

The reader is only informed that some migrants were agitated and expressing violent behavior, and because of that the police was called. There is no explanation provided for such behavior, notwithstanding the negative evaluation implicit in the title.

In summary, terms such as ‘migrants’, ‘people’, ‘asylum seekers’, and ‘refugees’ do not always offer an accurate definition. Conflation of legal statuses to refer to refugees seems to indicate a lack of appropriate knowledge on forced migration policy on the part of newspapers. They also pose the risk of being politically charged and used as weapons to dehumanize people (Reidy, 2022).

Separately, the coverage of these events can and should be compared with coverage during the ‘migration crisis’. In 2015, news items also rarely allude to national or ethnic identifying classifiers. Although some interesting headlines are found, such as: “Youths, women, Christians: these are the first official refugees to arrive in Portugal” (Torkington & Ribeiro, 2019, p. 7). Clearly aimed at reassuring the public that the refugees arriving in Portugal were not a threat to society, this headline reveals that the receptive stance of the Portuguese government and society was conditional, and only refugees with certain characteristics were truly welcomed.

### *Zmar case*

My third subgroup deals with news items from 2021, reporting a Covid-19 outbreak among immigrant agricultural workers who lived in the southern region of Portugal, which led to the government requisitioning private housing to accommodate them. This subgroup of items produces a profusion of negative moral evaluations and the labelling of failure as the causal interpretation of the event. The actor identified in all items as responsible for the failure is the government, albeit the ‘failure’ itself relates to two distinct issues. In different items or even in the same item, failure connoted to the government links to a lack of responsibility for the precarious conditions of living of immigrant agricultural workers, but also with its requisition of empty houses at Zmar condominium to shelter them.

The same applies to the moral evaluations identified, which are divided between negative evaluations of what is characterized as a disrespect to immigrants’ basic rights, and what is characterized as a disrespect for the rights of private property. Although the government had demanded availability of empty houses on the condominium and despite the fact that Zmar, the property owner of the holiday condominium, was effectively a bankrupt proprietor whose main creditors were state-owned entities, both politicians from right-wing parties, the president of the Portuguese Bar Association, and op-ed writers sought to link this measure request with an infringement of the constitution.

Arguably, differences are clear when it came to the positions of the parties within the right political spectrum. As shared by CM, while the far-right party Chega [Enough] defined the issue solely as a crucial problem for the residents of Odemira, where the outbreak took place, and the owners of houses at Zmar (but not the ones where the immi-

grants would be located), the leader of the right party CDS did not avoid mentioning the abject situation of the immigrants amidst his critique of the government's handling of the matter:

In a comment on his Facebook account, CDS president Francisco Rodrigues dos Santos asked the executive to back down on the requisition, "replacing it with another that is proportionate and adequate to ensure public health" [...] that "is in line with the most basic rights of the Portuguese", such as "respect for private property" [...] (Lusa, 2021, May 2). The national committee of Chega "deeply repudiates the civil requisition of the hotel unit Zmar" [...] and promised to support them and the population of Odemira, who "feel unjustly affected by the specific situation of a certain labor sector and the migrant communities that have, in excess, arrived in that part of the country" (Lusa, 2021, May 1).

One item by E highlights the negative evaluation of the government as it was expressed by Rui Rio, the then leader of the center-right party PSD – "Covid-19. Rio says the situation in Odemira 'shames' Portugal and questions 'what has MAI [Ministry of Internal Affairs] done'" (Lusa, 2020, May 5). Rio didn't mention or criticize the requisition of Zmar's houses, although the selection of his phrases refers to a televised interview broadcasted later that day.

On the other side of the political spectrum, CM exposes the negative evaluation of the then leader of the left-party Bloco de Esquerda [Left Bloc] regarding the abuses surrounding immigrants work – "Catarina Martins on immigrants in Odemira: 'Scary stories that put public health at stake'" (Ferreira, 2020, May 10). The tabloid also shares the more neutral evaluation of Portugal's President of the Republic who, while recognizing the dismal situation of the immigrants, avoided pointing fingers: "Marcelo considers that immigration problem was 'the most evident' in Odemira" (Lusa, 2020, May 10).

While the defenders of immigrants' rights refrained from criticizing the position of those who clamored the violation of the right to private property, one of E's op-ed writer directly addressed it. In "The only dictatorship in Odemira is lived by the immigrants" (Oliveira, 2021, May 11). In a black humor piece, journalist Daniel Oliveira negatively evaluates the intervention of the Human Rights Commission in defense of the owners as requested by the president of the Bar Association.

One CM's item also shares the negative evaluation of the Bar Association's position, as expressed by the civil society association SOS Racismo [SOS Racism]: "Concerning the defense of human rights, the president of the Bar Association was clear: the Bar Association is not available to stand alongside those who suffer and those who see their fundamental rights violated (...)" (Lusa, 2020, May 4).

### ***Emigrants***

The 'emigrants' related items demonstrate a gradual shift of the 'problem definition' element as the pandemic developed. Before the closure of borders, there were news items

on emigrants who had returned to the homeland, who, supposedly due to inappropriate behavior, had disseminated the Covid-19 virus. I also identified the calls to action (treatment recommendation) by mayors of small towns with a high percentage of emigrants and elder residents in order to prevent emigrants from returning to their homes. Those who decided to keep geographic distance to protect their dearest ones were evaluated positively.

Even when it is not directly expressed, the negative evaluation of emigrants' behavior is implicit, as some emigrants had been accused of spreading the disease, or it was expected by the residents it would happen: "Covid-19. Emigrants back to Portugal are breaking quarantine" (Paulo & Franco, 2020, March 20). This bolstered resentment and disagreement on the part of emigrants in France (one of the larger Portuguese diasporas), as expressed in one E's item – "Covid-19: 'Stay at home but in France': migrants feel condemned to a 'double penalty'" (Ribeiro, 2020, April 9).

Ironically, when a few lockdown measures were lifted, members of the government started to appraise the traditional coming of emigrants during the summer as a 'success', pondering they would surely comply with protection measures. Because the emigrants were still expected, the causal interpretation of such a success could only be a wishful prediction. That period corresponded to the effort of the government to boost economic activity following the strict initial Covid-19 measures. The yearly holiday return of emigrants was fundamental to achieve this goal. Contrasting with the rhetoric of the beginning of the pandemic, state actors positively framed them during the spring of 2020, ascertaining their compliance with health recommendations.

Worth mentioning is one E's item about a TV interview with the Minister of Welfare and Social Security, in which the following is highlighted: "With tourism companies preparing for and asking for the return, the minister assured that emigrants will also be able to return, as is seen every summer. 'The possibilities for emigrants to return by land exist, as they always have.'" (Correia, 2020, May 18).

This subgroup also includes news items about difficulties faced by Portuguese emigrants in different countries. They report deaths, losses of income, and the difficulties/impossibility of returning/visiting the homeland due to travel restrictions or the obligation to quarantine. The collective term 'community' ('Portuguese community') is frequent in this subgroup, indicating a tendency to frame the dispersed emigrants as a coherent and uniform group.

Such framing of emigrants as an imagined community deftly speaks to the postcolonial imaginary of the emigrants as the guarantors of the transnational character of Portugal. This inextricable relation was made clear by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Augusto Santos Silva, when he invoked one of the 'heroes' of the maritime expansion: "Augusto Santos Silva invoked, in this respect, 'Fernão Mendes Pinto's characteristics of the Portuguese' to underline that 'one cannot imagine where Portuguese people appear' (...)" (Lusa, 2020, May 5).

In opposition, there are no news items reporting on the deaths, prolonged effects of Covid-19 infection, and losses of income by migrants in Portugal. While in the beginning of the pandemic, news framing of the Portuguese emigrants indicated that the prejudiced representation of them as second-class citizens was not completely eradicated in the society, the newspapers analyzed also valued the difficulties some emigrants faced by reporting them, with one E's item even sharing the dissatisfaction of the diaspora in France, as mentioned above.

Interestingly, while this item emphasizes in the title that "(...) emigrants feel condemned to a 'double penalty'" (Ribeiro, 2020, April 9) by not being able to travel due to the border shutdown, another news item from E reports that the PSP (Portuguese police) had identified one refugee – regarding hostels case – who went to the supermarket because he was hungry (Lusa, 2020, May 18). Unsurprisingly, CM went further in its follow-up news item with the following headline: "Five refugees infected with Covid-19 who were transferred from the Ota base *escape* [my emphasis, the term in Portuguese is 'fogem'] and go shopping", (Curado, 2020, May 17).

## Final considerations

The perception of crisis is structural in post-traditional social orders, and especially notorious in the scope of an individual's identity and their relation to others. So, what distinguishes occurrences labelled as 'crises' – in the context of this discussion, the Covid-19 pandemic and the migration phenomenon? Georgiou and Frosh (2022) argue that a crisis is not merely a schism event but constitutes a new ground for thinking about such events. Furthermore, they define Covid-19 as a 'meta-crisis' which made visible modernity's perpetual crisis-condition. That means, this crisis would have catalyzed and made visible already existing crises: social inequality, racism, xenophobia, gender violence, climate change, and so on.

It is fundamental to consider from which socio-cultural context a crisis is experienced both at an individual and elite group level. As I discussed here, the 'migration crisis' is clearly a crisis for the migrants themselves, but it has been framed in European media and politics distinctly. It is chiefly a crisis for the normative white national populations that made visible ethnically and racially others among 'us', while the EU has accordingly acted to maintain migrants' invisibility by keeping them away from its borders (Hayden, 2022).

In that sense, the Covid-19 pandemic presented the peculiarity of being a global crisis, whose risk of infection hit everybody. However, that risk reached specific groups of people differently. Those who were already living in economic and social deprivation were easy targets for infection. Thus, outbreaks of Covid-19 among asylum seekers and immigrant agricultural workers made visible the endemic inequalities they face in Portugal, namely around housing, labor rights, and health conditions. Those occurrences undeniably



exposed the differences between the rhetoric of the elites and the rule of law, and the grim reality of exploitation and disrespect for migrants' rights.

Despite the differences between the mainstream newspapers E and DN and the tabloid CM, these legacy news outlets favored the frames of the elites. Notwithstanding the presence of frames advanced by other actors, the prevalence of sources from the government, established parties (as it was evident in Zmar case) and institutions (hostels case) diminished the potential to discuss these endemic inequalities and who they impacted most. The context of crisis also exposed those elites' contend in advancing their preferred frames, which many times was expressed by slippery and confusing discourses – most evident in the emigrants' subgroup, when the same government's sources call for emigrants to come to Portugal, right after blaming them for their inappropriate behavior in the months before. And again, in the Zmar case, when negative moral evaluations of some sources pointed to a rights' infringement, which however encompassed both immigrants and house owners.

In summary, the coverage reasserted the social widespread of Luso-Tropicalist ideas. This is especially notorious in the coverage of hostels case, when the government and their institutional partners naively tried to justify the inappropriate living conditions of asylum seekers almost as a natural phenomenon. Thus, keeping up with the narrative of a welcoming Portuguese society.

Therefore, I did not detect the development of a new sensibility for reflecting on events involving migrants during the pandemic or any questioning of the idea of an absence of racism among Portuguese people. Indeed, it seems that the only thing the Covid-19 pandemic made visible through news media was the association of the invisible virus with the visible, and already securitized, outgroups. Cádima et al. (2022) also observed a discriminatory drift in the public and private open TV channels when reporting on neighborhoods with migrant background and/or Roma communities. Their population was framed as reluctant to comply with sanitary and civic directives, whilst the social, working, and economic contextualization of these communities was almost absent.

Reflecting on the intensive publicness of the Covid-19 crisis, Georgiou and Titley (2022) discuss the usually assumed equation between publicness and progressive political possibility. Based on the analysis presented here, it seems that public awareness less often than supposed leads to material and political change. It is beyond the scope of this study to measure the frames' effects of that coverage and their impact on the public opinion. However, the pandemic and the migration phenomenon certainly impacted discourse around campaigns for legislative elections in March 2024. Unsurprisingly, during the campaign the far-right party Chega linked the immigrants with an abuse of the social security system (Silva, 2024). Some leaders of the center-right PSD also began to associate an 'uncontrollable' migration with issues of security (Correia, 2024). As the cited news items indicate, both arguments are simply negated by the facts.

Crucially, the two outbreaks of Covid-19 among migrants brought to fore a previously little-known reality. Immigrants from Asia, who are the majority of agricultural workers, are relatively new arrivals to Portugal – a country which still shows one of the lowest numbers of asylum requests in the EU. I argue that these events had a key role in shedding light on invisible issues that, potentially and gradually, could lead to political change. Echoing the discussion here, De Wiele and Papacharissi (2021) also observe that the Covid-19 pandemic greatly exposed embedded structural inequities within the United States (US), thus defying the persistence of post-racial mythos.

In short, the identification of varied and fragmented frames made explicit the (un) established narrative around the Portuguese national identity. By simultaneously colliding with the prestigious position acquired by the emigrants after the decolonization and with the widespread idea of an absence of racism, news media framing of Covid-19 and migration was a symptom of the crisis itself, revealing unsettled discourses and alternating anxieties.

## Notes

- 1 It was not possible to keep the search of the other newspapers in Nexis because CM is the only Portuguese news outlet available in its catalogue.
- 2 Newspaper translation, namely headlines and excerpts, are my own.

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