

AN UNCOMMON UNDERSTANDING

**EUROPEAN MEDIA DISCOURSES OF
CRISIS & HUMAN RIGHTS**

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October 2018

Oder soll man es lassen?

Private Helfer retten Flüchtlinge und Migranten im Mittelmeer aus Seenot.
Ist das legitim? Ein Pro und Contra

*** Or should they stop?**



AN UNCOMMON UNDERSTANDING?

What is the role of the media in debating issues that involve notions of human rights?

To what extent can the media critique human rights as unquestionable moral truths?

And how is human rights discourse currently shaping public opinion?

DEFINITION AND PERCEPTION

Standards of treatment that human beings command by virtue of their inherent dignity and personhood

Multifaceted concept (Minogue, 1979) : universal rights, specific populations, legal agreements, individuals/communities

A dense body of national and international law AND a discourse with a strong emotional resonance

Virtually any topic can be framed as a question of human rights

Spread of rights-based language



INALIENABILITY VS. FLUIDITY

Social constructivist perspective (K. Nash, 2015):

Human rights = fluid and changeable

Flexibility and moral power of the narrative of human rights (M. Freeman, 2011)

= a malleable trope

Contemporary challenges redefined as assaults on basic rights

Nuanced situation → polarisation of good/evil



THE ROLE OF MEDIA



Concepts articulated as discourse (e.g. texts, discursive practices) (L. Khor, 2016)

Media = creative in the process of (re)defining human rights

The way communities understand and experience the notion of human rights is shaped by media communication

Arena where political and social actors fight for public perception

Mobilisation of right-based discourse to define issues and justify actions/policies – perpetuated by the media

MEDIA FREEDOM

Media = subjects of the freedom of expression. Media rely on the concept of “freedom of the press” (UDHR, Article 19)

Role of media in promoting human rights = dependent to some extent on the rights they enjoy themselves (e.g. reduced in autocratic regimes)

Even if independent of government, often not free from interference by other actors



THE HUMAN RIGHTS CORPUS: BETWEEN GLOBALISATION AND POLITICISATION



Defining
Monitoring
Agenda setting



global human rights debate
characterised by degree of
hegemony
in politics & media

THE HUMAN RIGHTS CORPUS

Politicisation:

→ **disproportional shift of power to state institutions while shrinking relevance of non-state actors, organisations, individuals, volunteers...**

→ **perception of the state owning responsibility for safeguarding rights**

→ **civil society as passive spectator?**

(Hartwell 1979, as quoted in: Krzyzanowski et. al., 2018)



THE 'REFUGEE CRISIS': THE FIGURE OF THE REFUGEE

THREAT!

to nation-based
order

to cultural values

to national
identity



VICTIM!

of geopolitical
conflict

helpless,
innocent

dependent on
Western aid

NARRATIVE OF VICTIMHOOD: WHY PROBLEMATIC?











EVERYTHING BUT HUMAN?

- mass of unfortunates
- reduced to corporeal existence
- ‘sub-citizen’ with no legitimacy/power to voice political will
- lack of civic status as effect of the power relations that claim to sustain them as human bodies
- → Narratives actually deprive the refugees of any rights & human dignity



(Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2018)

CRISIS?



Employment of human rights narratives in a non-war context with the effect of elevating political or foreign policy issues to the status of “crisis”

Examples: Crimea, Brexit, Macedonia/Greece naming issue

Draw implicitly on loose concepts of UDHR, particularly Articles 21 + 22

TOOLS: RHETORIC, IMAGES AND POLLS

Kia Online

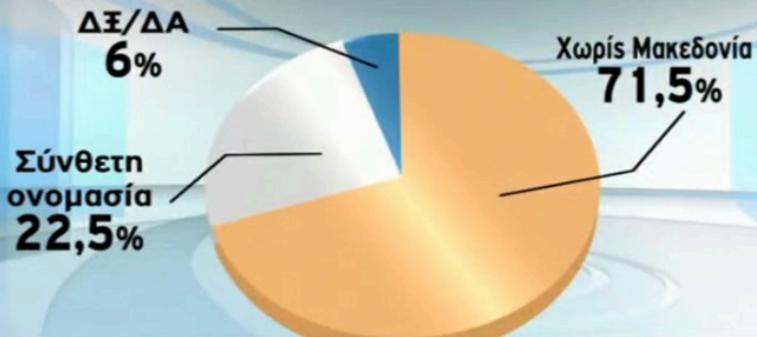
Daily Mail

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DAILY MAIL COMMENT: Why this decision is a betrayal of common sense, the people and democracy



ΠΟΙΑ ΛΥΣΗ ΘΑ ΑΠΟΔΕΧΟΣΑΣΤΑΝ ΓΙΑ ΤΗΝ ΠΓΔΜ



BRIEF EXAMPLES: BREXIT

To the great mass of the fair-minded public, yesterday's ruling by three High Court judges that Parliament should have the chance to reconsider **Brexit** will have come as an outrageous betrayal of democracy.

News > UK > Home News

Brexit could prompt human rights crisis, lawyers warn

Open letter says Prime Minister must not be allowed to use leaving the EU as an excuse to also exit the European Convention on Human Rights



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DAILY MAIL COMMENT: Why this decision is a betrayal of common sense, the people and democracy

By [DAILY MAIL COMMENT](#)

PUBLISHED: 00:51 BST, 4 November 2016 | UPDATED: 09:19 BST, 4 November 2016

CRIMEA



Люди говорят о том, что они вне политики и на добровольных началах защищают права горожан. (НТВ)

People say that they are outside of politics and volunteer to protect the rights of citizens. (NTV)



CONCLUSION & SUGGESTIONS

Clarify



trace back moral assumptions to their origin

Educate



explain shared rights and their legal context

Engage



provide sense of agency and responsibility

READINGS

L. Khor (2016) *Human Rights Discourse in a Global Network: Books beyond Borders*, Oxon: Routledge

K. Minogue (1979) 'The history of the idea of human rights' in W. Laquer and B. Rubin, (eds), *The Human Rights Reader*, New York: Meridian

K. Nash (2015) *The Political Sociology of Human Rights*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge

L. Chouliaraki, T. Stolic (2017) “Rethinking humanity and responsibility in the refugee ‘crisis’: A visual typology of news media.”

A.Triandafyllidou (2018) ‘A “Refugee Crisis” Unfolding: “Real” Events and Their Interpretation in Media and Political Debates’, *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 16:1-2, 198-216.

M. Krzyzanowski et. al. (2018) “The Mediatization and the Politicization of the “Refugee Crisis” in Europe. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*.

THANK YOU!

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS (1948): 58 MEMBERS VOTE

OUTTAKES

Voted in favor – abstained – did not vote – not a member of UN yet

THE PARADOX WITHIN ...AS WITNESSED IN SYRIA

Conform with UN law:

Syria under Assad took legitimate action in 2013, when asking Russia for military support, because:

- Art. 51 of UN Charta grants right for collective self-defense
- As the executive of state it can nationally implement UN law
- Syrian & Russian bilateral agreement from 1980

OUTTAKES

Non-Conform with UN law:

U.S., UK & France airstrikes as well as U.S. support to rebel groups a violation

- Art. 2 of UN Charta
- All use of force has to be legitimated by the UN Security council
- Investigation on chemical weapons not even complete



“International law is failing us in Syria.” (Ingber, 2017)