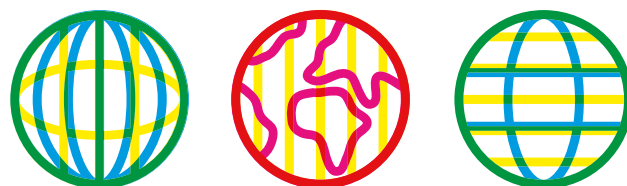# Narrative, Scale, and Two Refugee Crises in Comparison in the Italian Media

Simona Adinolfi and Marco Caracciolo
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opportunities
for a fair narrative on migration

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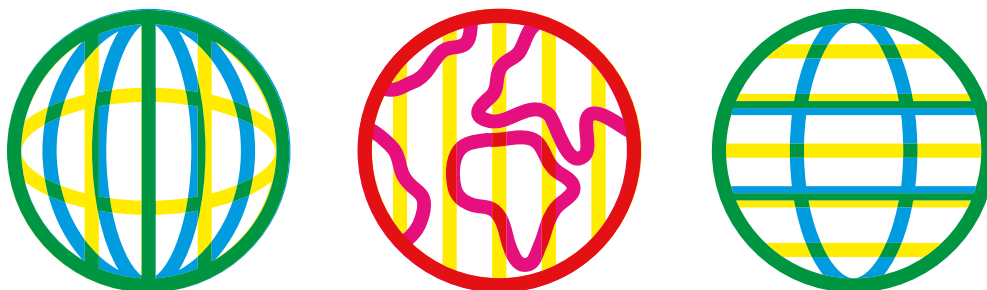
Narrative, Scale, and Two Refugee Crises in Comparison in the Italian Media

Work Package 5 – Deliverable 5.5, Italian case study

Lead Beneficiary: Ghent University
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Abstract

Bringing together narrative theory, migration studies, and contemporary discussions in the environmental humanities, this article considers the significance of the concept of scale for media narratives on migration. The sta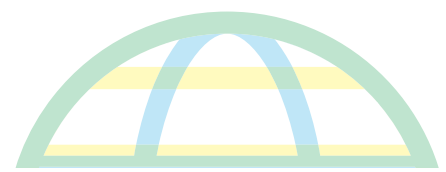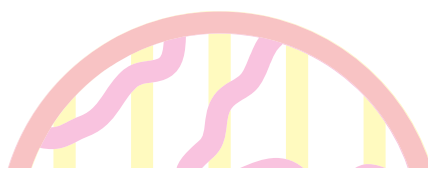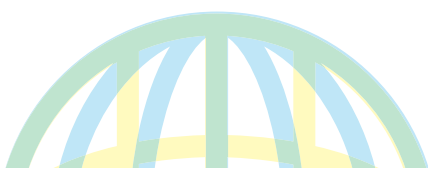rting point is that migration is a multiscalar phenomenon that ranges from migrants' personal experience to the global factors (such as poverty and climate change) that shape migration on a planetary scale. Media narratives are often unable to bring together those scales, privileging the scale of regional or national debates at the expense of migrants' experience or global phenomena. We demonstrate that idea through the qualitative analysis of migration coverage in the Italian media, focusing on two newspapers (*Corriere della sera* and *Il Giornale*) and two periods in 2015 and 2022. We thus compare what is frequently described as the refugee "crisis" of 2015 and the wave of migration created by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The analysis shows that, in both newspapers, migration coverage in 2015 was marked by a disconnect between local and global events, whereas in 2022 the event structure of the war afforded closer integration between scales. This suggests that, even when no simple causal linked can be established between the causes of migration and its effects, more efforts are needed to project a complex, nuanced image of migration in media storytelling.

1. Introduction

A comprehensive, multiperspectival view of migration is sorely needed in public debates. We argue in this article that narrative can play a role in conveying this view, but only if it is able to account for the different *scales* that shape migration and the discourse surrounding it. Particularly when migration is so significant numerically or politically that we reach for the word "crisis," migration narratives have to juggle multiple scales, from the level of individual experience to local, national, and geopolitical factors. So far, the OPPORTUNITIES project has addressed issues of scale by introducing a distinction between narratives *on* migration (which are imposed on migrants by political or media discourse) and narratives *of* migration, which are told by migrants themselves (Gebauer and Sommer 2022). The former foreground larger scales and typically represent migrants as a group, while the latter are grounded in the particulars of individual, human-scale experience. To reduce the gap between narratives on and of migration, stories would have to encompass various scalar levels and also address the discontinuities between these levels.

With a focus on the Italian newspapers *Corriere della sera* and *Il Giornale*, this article examines and compares the negotiation of scale in the media discourse surrounding migration to Europe during the refugee waves of 2015 and 2022. The analysis shows considerable differences across these time frames in terms of how media narratives handled questions of scale in the face of increasing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers. At the same time, we identify a surprising convergence in the way the scale of migration is presented in the two Italian newspapers *despite* their significant ideological differences (the *Corriere* is a centrist platform with an international outlook, while *Il Giornale* is a stronghold of right-wing populism). This convergence suggests that addressing the multiple scales of migration represents an important conceptual challenge across the political spectrum.

In general, scale can be defined as the level of spatial or temporal compression adopted by a representation: the scale of a map, for example, tells us how much physical space is represented by one centimeter on the map.[1] The larger the scale, the more the details of objects "on the ground" are lost or abstracted away: for example, we can see streets on a city map, not on the map of a whole country. We tend to think of scale as a spatial phenomenon, but because temporal intervals are often conceptualized in spatial terms the same kind of scalar compression can be applied to time: hence, we talk about "geological scale" to refer to the extremely slow-moving processes (by human standards) of the Earth's history.

Our point of departure is that the phenomenon of migration spans multiple scalar levels.[2] First, we have the personal level: the individual migrant's experience of leaving the country they call home, driven by war, poverty, or other factors. Sociolinguistic research on migration tends to center on this scale, for instance by studying migrants' narratives and the broader tensions they reveal, through ethnographic methods that favor experiential particulars (see De Fina and Tseng 2017). Also in terms of possible (or desired) effects on out-groups, the individual scale is often highlighted in the discourse surrounding migration because, as psychologists have known for decades, human beings are much more likely to experience compassions for individuals than for a group whose members remain anonymous and undifferentiated (see Cameron 2017). This is the reason why many look at narrative as an important means of promoting altruistic behavior: through its particularity and focus on highly delineated characters, stories are thought to foster an understanding of individual experience that may lead to empathy and compassion. As Suzanne Keen (2007) has argued influentially, the claim that narrative enhances our capacity to empathize with others is anything but an empirical given; nevertheless, it is hard to dispute the more basic idea that narrative tends to favor individual protagonists who can be the target of empathetic identification (even if this identification doesn't have long-term psychological or behavioral consequences).

However, migration exists on scales of reality that go beyond individual experience. An influx of refugees can have a considerable impact on the local level of a city or community that suddenly find
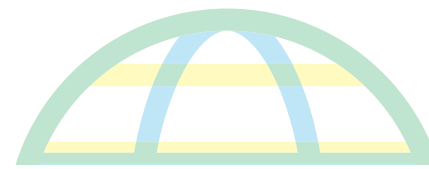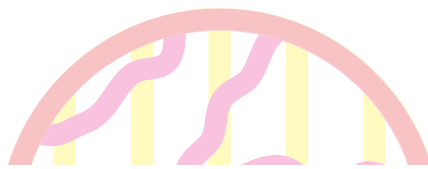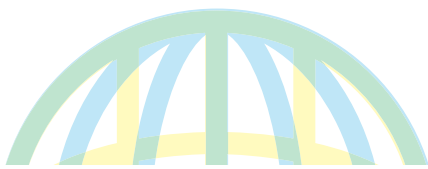
themselves coexisting with a significant number of migrants. Migration also shapes political debates on a national level, as we know too well, and it can play into tensions and conflicts on an even larger, regional level, as in the case of EU policies that determine the ways in which incoming refugees are welcomed and distributed across the European Union. Finally, migration is typically the result of *geopolitical* events, such as armed conflict, environmental disasters (including those related to climate change), and inequality created by corporate and colonialist exploitation of the Global South. Migration, to sum up, is a complex phenomenon that embraces personal, local, national, regional, and planetary scales.

If one of the central posits of the OPPORTUNITIES project is that narratives influence the public perception of migration, it is important to consider that stories are not equally at ease with these spatial scales. On the contrary, as we have just argued stories are strongly biased towards the personal—what narratologists call "experientiality" (Fludernik 1996)—and to some extent the local (human-scale events within relatively small communities). That does not necessarily mean that one couldn't tell a story about events taking place on a regional or planetary scale, of course. "Civil war broke out in Syria, and hundreds of thousands of refugees left the country for Europe" is also a story of sorts, but it is unlikely to register as a good or engaging story because of its bare, factual abstraction. To put this point more simply, stories shine when they foreground the particular and the experiential; when they turn to large-scale phenomena, they struggle to attract our attention.

This is an observation often made by scholars within the field of the environmental humanities.[3] Perhaps most famously, Rob Nixon (2011) talks about the "slow violence" of environmental devastation in the Global South—by which he means gradual and largely invisible phenomena such as pollution or habitat loss which simply cannot be packaged in a neat, TV-friendly narrative. Nixon asks: "How can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and star nobody?" (2011, 3). This is a problem for narrative theorists, but it is also a problem for commentators in both traditional and digital media who seek to narrativize something as intangible as environmental degradation.

Moving closer to the focus of the OPPORTUNITIES project, we want to claim here that that challenge of narrativizing "disasters that are slow moving and long in the making" is just as significant for narratives of or on migration.[4] The challenge can be defined in terms of scale: narrative has trouble conveying phenomena that are either numerically vast and geographically distributed (spatial scale) or take place over considerable periods (temporal scale). More specifically, this trouble reflects what another scholar in the environmental humanities, Derek Woods (2014), has called "scale variance": namely, the existence of gaps and discontinuities across scalar levels.[5] Here is a straightforward example of scale variance: when one moves from the level of the individual migrant's experience to the level of national or regional responses to migration patterns, the experiential details of migration—that is, the rich and often traumatic texture of individual experience—are lost. Simultaneously, the political and ideological calculus kicks in.

Scale variance reflects the fact that the logic that applies on a certain scale does not necessarily carry over to higher levels of analysis. For example, it is perfectly possible to sympathize with the plight of an individual migrant (whether encountered in person or through storytelling) while holding anti-immigration views in the ballot box. Our attitudes towards migrants don't always "scale up." That is also a problem for narrative, and narrative theory, because narratives on and of migration are fully adequate only when they are able to evoke the multiscalar complexity of migration itself. Ideally, narrative would straddle the various scales we have mentioned, moving from the personal to the global with ease and awareness of the inescapability of scale variance.

Based on the case studies discussed below, we have reason to think that the European media, particularly around the 2015 "crisis," have been remiss in painting a comprehensive, multiscalar picture of migration. The result was a highly fragmentary or "centrifugal" narrative, in which the national debate on migration and its local impact was fundamentally decoupled from the geopolitical *causes* of migration, leading to partial and biased understanding.[6] The problem of scale variance was not addressed or even acknowledged, because news stories focused on the personal and local, or on the national and regional, or on the geopolitical—with limited attempts to integrate these scales. This, at least, is what emerges from our analysis of the coverage of the migrant crisis in Italy's dailies *Corriere della sera* and *Il Giornale*. The former is the country's premier centrist

newspaper, while *Il Giornale* has become a platform for the populist right. Yet, despite their profoundly different histories and ideological leanings, the coverage of the 2015 and 2022 refugee "crises" in the pages of the *Corriere* and *Il Giornale* is strikingly similar: in 2015, newspaper articles made limited reference to the causes of the crisis, among them the long-running and "slow moving" (to use again Nixon's terminology) civil war in Syria.

The media thus promoted a piecemeal narrative, which—interestingly—mirrored the kind of fragmentation we saw on the level of national responses, with each country going its own way, at least at first, and European institutions struggling to find a workable compromise. The early coverage of the 2022 war in Ukraine throws this fragmentation into sharp relief, because the Italian media discussing the Russian invasion have taken a very different approach: they draw repeated and explicit connections between the war in Ukraine, the exodus it generated, and European and national responses. In other words, the narratives circulating in the Italian media in 2022 do a much better job of addressing scale variance and integrating multiple scales within a coherent framing of the crisis. The reasons for this difference are no doubt complex, but they may again reflect narrative's scalar bias towards a relatively self-contained event like an invasion, which can be measured in days and weeks, as opposed to the murky realities of Syria's civil war and other geopolitical conflicts.

We will return to this point in the discussion section. For now, we want to detail the claims we made by discussing two samples of articles from the national edition of the *Corriere* and *Il Giornale*, on which we base our analysis: the first sample comes from the first half of September 2015, the peak of the climate crisis and the days immediately following Angela Merkel's "Wir schaffen das" speech; the second sample is based on the two weeks after February 24, 2022, the day when the Russian military started its assault on Ukraine. The articles were initially selected by searching for the word "profugo" ("refugee" in Italian), leading to a corpus of about a dozen articles per newspaper. After a careful reading of these articles (with one of us focusing on the *Corriere*, the other on *Il Giornale*), we shared our preliminary findings and developed the ideas outlined in the next sections regarding shared trends and patterns in the two newspapers' treatment of scalar levels.
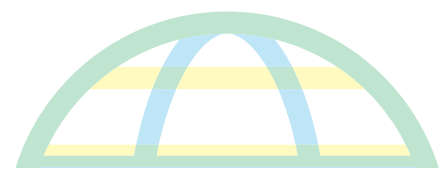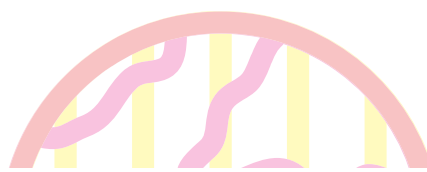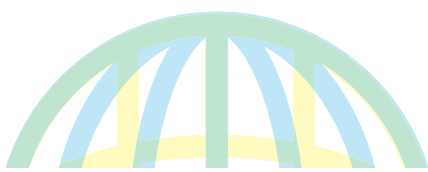
2. Two Weeks of Migration Coverage in the *Corriere*, 2015 and 2022

Montali et al. (2013) offer a helpful survey of migration discourse in the Italian media in the period 1992-2009, using again the *Corriere* as their main source: "the press refers to migration as an invasion, describes the migrants' presence in schools as a problem of social order and sanitation, presents migrants' citizenship rights as a controversial and potentially risky issue, and associates migration with the rise of crime and deviance in Italian society" (2013, 245). The article predates the 2015 crisis: it captures attitudes towards migrants in a country that had until the 1990s experienced extremely limited immigration. Building on a well-established tradition of metaphor analysis in the study of migration discourse (e.g., Charteris-Black 2006), Montali et al. identify two metaphorical mappings that recur in their corpus from the *Corriere* and strongly suggest suspicion against migrants: metaphors focusing on movement (for instance, "flow"), which objectify migrants by comparing them to inanimate matter, or military metaphors (an "invasion"), which see migrants as a hostile force. These metaphors do important work at the level of scale, because they bring migration down to the movement of material objects or an act of deliberate military aggression: in other words, they reduce the complexity of migration to a phenomenon that is either directly perceptible (in the case of movement) or at least driven by conscious intention (in the case of military language).[7]

Significantly, however, while Montali et al. close with a call for a "new European culture of migration" (2013, 247), Europe or EU institutions don't play a major role in their analysis, and plausibly they don't feature prominently in the news stories they analyze (though, of course, we would need access to those stories to know for sure). The picture is radically different in September 2015, when the EU becomes one of the main players in the *Corriere* articles. What emerges is a sense of deep fragmentation, which is encapsulated by the following metaphor-rich passage:

> L'Europa dell'emergenza-immigrazione è ormai un accavallarsi di barriere che salgono e scendono improvvisamente e senza coordinamento, di norme comunitarie interpretate in modi diversi a seconda degli interessi nazionali. Di governi che, bloccando senza preavviso la libera circolazione delle persone, anche per poche ore o pochi giorni, e senza un'emergenza dimostrata . . . escono, entrano e poi riescono dai patti di Schengen. (L. O. 2015)

> The Europe of the migrant crisis is already a crisscrossing of barriers that rise and fall suddenly and without any coordination, of EU regulations variously interpreted on the basis of national interest, of governments which, suspending without warning the free circulation of people, even if only for a few hours or days, and without a demonstrable emergency . . . leave, then re-enter, then leave again the Schengen agreement.

Notably, the disparate and piecemeal response of EU countries is presented as the main source of instability "on the ground," with Italian authorities struggling to keep up with increasing migrant numbers when other EU countries are closing borders or refusing to pull their weight. This lack of European solidarity not only towards the migrants but also towards countries, like Italy and Greece, that struggle to keep up with the influx feeds, of course, into a centrifugal narrative—put otherwise, a narrative that is highly critical of EU institutions. Many of the headlines foreground this sense of widespread European fragmentation and closure: "Berlino chiude la frontiera," "un muro tra Macedonia

e Grecia," "la grande spaccatura" ("Berlin closes the border," "a wall between Macedonia and Greece," "the great rift") are some of the most prominent examples.

Interestingly, however, even as the articles foreground fragmentation *within* Europe, they also perform this fragmentation by failing to consistently name or refer to the geopolitical causes of this migrant crisis, most notably the civil war in Syria, but also of course the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Libya. The two most relevant scales here are the national and the regional or European, and they are presented as oppositional: the individual migrant's experience is largely sidelined, but so is the geopolitical scale of the forces that are driving the migrants' movement. This is not to say that the *Corriere* makes no reference to the events in Syria, but the connection between the war and the migrant crisis in Europe is mostly left unexamined. This disconnect is visually displayed by the front page of the September 10 edition (see Figure 1), which juxtaposes two stories: the banner refers to Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war, in the top left; meanwhile, a box at the center of the page contains a picture with a long line of migrants. This box is enclosed by text encapsulating two conflicting messages: on top, next to the word "Migrants," we have Jean-Claude Juncker's plea to welcome refugees; at the bottom, we learn that the "Danish paradise" has just done the opposite, by shutting down all trains from Germany. While the newspaper frames the refugee crisis by foregrounding the rift between EU and national scales, with the migrants perilously caught in between, it does not acknowledge the link between the two narratives evoked here, the refugees and the war, and thus inadvertently creates another scalar rift: explicit attempts to integrate the geopolitical, the regional, and the national scales (and link them to the migrants' individual experience) are, not just on this front page but across the articles, few and far between.

Compare this to the situation in early 2022, with the war raging in Ukraine. On the frontpage of the March 7 edition (see Figure 2) a banner reads "I profughi in trappola," the "cornered refugees," a headline that draws an unambiguous connection between the "war in Europe" and the refugees. This message is underscored by the shocking image of a dead body on the street, with a suitcase poignantly poised next to it—a symbol of tragically interrupted travel. There is very little room for misunderstanding what drives the migrants here: time and again, the newspaper reminds us that whatever logistical problem the refugees' influx creates in the EU is the result of dramatic events unfolding on the Union's doorstep. The centrifugal narratives of fragmentation—closed borders, quotas, internal disagreements—are completely absent: instead, the seeming coordination of the EU's response, with the decision to grant all Ukrainian refugees temporary protection, is matched by the ease with which the *Corriere* stories move back and forth between geopolitical, regional, and national scales. In other words, this is a centripetal narrative that foregrounds the EU's centralized decision-making, and it is accompanied by strong multiscalar integration.

This integration is achieved not just through narrative strategies but also through metaphors that deviate subtly but meaningfully from those adopted during previous waves of migration. For instance, we read that "L'Italia [è] in prima linea nella accoglienza agli ucraini in fuga dalla guerra" ("Italy [is] on the front line of welcoming the Ukrainians who are fleeing the war"; Frignani 2022), which offers a significant twist on the military metaphors identified by Montali et al. (2013): in the face of an actual (non-metaphorical) invasion, it would be inappropriate to refer to the migrants as "invaders"; instead, the gesture of welcoming itself is turned into a war, a "front line," against the horrors perpetrated by the Russian army. Here the military metaphor contributes to merging the geopolitical and the national scales while avoiding the divisiveness of the "migrants are invaders" rhetoric discussed by Montali et al.

Another striking military metaphor that would have been unavailable in 2015 is deployed by Federico Fubini in an opinion piece dated March 12. On the one hand, Fubini uses rather conventional metaphors comparing the Ukrainian refugees to a "fiume in piena" ("river in full flood"). On the other hand, he explicitly refers to Vladimir Putin's "weaponization" of the refugees ("i profughi sono un'arma contro l'Europa"), as another way in which Putin is attempting to destabilize the European Union. This is a textbook example of how metaphor can compress a complex, large-scale phenomenon into a situation of human-scale interaction: a character, the villainous Russian president, using a weapon to realize a certain goal. In 2015, it would have been much more difficult to reduce the flow of migrants to an intentional design, which is part of the reason why journalists struggled to tell a coherent, multiscalar story about the crisis.
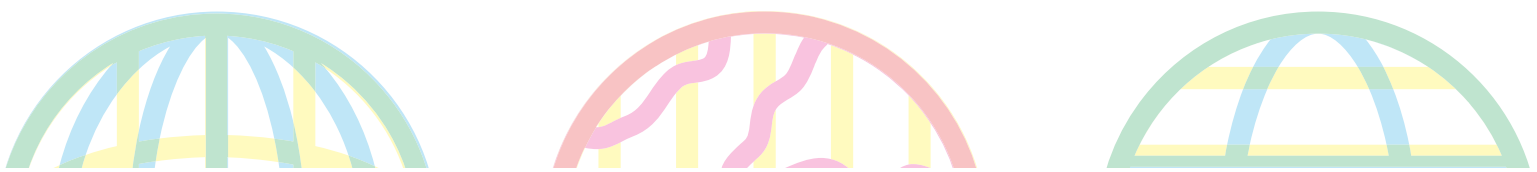
3. Two Weeks of Migration Coverage in *Il Giornale*, 2015 and 2022

Il Giornale is a less internationally established newspaper than the *Corriere*, but it has a long history nonetheless: founded in 1974 by historian and writer Indro Montanelli and currently owned by the Berlusconi family, it has become one of the main platforms for right-wing populism in Italy. As we will discuss, the narratives in *Il Giornale* in the two weeks following Merkel's speech in 2015 and the beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2022 are significantly different in tone from those in *Il Corriere*, but they converge with them in establishing a direct causal link between the war in Ukraine and the refugee "crisis." By contrast, in 2015, both the *Corriere* and *Il Giornale* discussed the refugee emergency in abstraction from its geopolitical causes.

The use of metaphors seems to be aligned with that of the *Corriere*: in the articles from September 2015, the choice of words such as "masses," "flows," "invasion," "(migration) bomb," "siege" is significantly higher compared to their usage in February 2022. Nevertheless, the use of words belonging to the "discourse of crisis and danger" (Kędra et al. 2018) is present in both the 2015 and the 2022 coverage of migration. The main difference is that in 2022 the perceived threat shifts from immigration itself to its cause—namely, Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In 2015, the migration crisis is introduced by sensationalist headlines such as "Allarme Immigrazione," "Immigration Alert" (Figure 3). In 2022, by contrast, a headline reads "Attacco all'Europa," "Attack on Europe" (Figure 4). A similar sentence prefaces an article by Francesca Angeli, dated February 25, 2022 ("Allarme Profughi" – "Refugees Alert"), in which the journalist offers a reflection on the arrival of millions of Ukrainians fleeing the war. The main worry, in this article, is the inability to properly assist all the people coming from Ukraine. The possibility of a "humanitarian catastrophe" (Angeli 2022) is the writer's main focus. Finally, while the refugee crisis in 2015 was seen as a "biblical invasion," the arrival of war refugees coming from Ukraine in 2022 is seen as a "biblical exodus" (Angeli 2022). The approach to the invasion of Ukraine is not simply that of a "humanitarian discourse" (Kędra et al. 2018). Rather, with the heading "Attacco all'Europa," "Attack on Europe," *Il Giornale* conveys a narrative of involvement in the circumstances of the war in Ukraine: in general, the newspaper's line on the war is that Europe as a whole is endangered, and hence readers should feel involved in what is happening in Ukraine and offer help as they can. This approach aims at creating what Roy Sommer defines as a "centripetal narrative" (Sommer 2022) and is definitely lacking at the time of the 2015 migration crisis, when the geopolitical causes of that refugee wave were hardly ever explicitly mentioned.

Another aspect standing out in this analysis is that of scale. In *Il Giornale*, scale seems to be deeply entangled with issues of narrative agency. Simply put, who is in charge of telling the refugees' stories? As mentioned in the introduction, a basic distinction we adopt in the OPPORTUNITIES project is between narratives *on* migration and narratives *of* migration. The former "emerge through the strategic framing of migration . . . . Such top-down narratives adopt an outside ('etic') perspective on migration, focusing on political, economic, legal, social and cultural issues rather than lived experience" (Gebauer 2021). The latter are personal narratives, "oral, visual or verbal accounts of migrants' experiences, told by themselves or observers close to them, from an inside ('emic') perspective" (Gebauer 2021). Our claim here is that narratives *of* migration are by far more frequent in *Il Giornale* coverage of the 2022 crisis than 2015: this frequency of narratives of migration reflects a focus on the scale of the individual, with news articles detailing the motivations and emotions of individual migrants. In 2015, by contrast, the focus is on regional and national level, with the increasing number of refugees being seen as a collective agent threatening national stability and security (but largely portrayed from an external, etic perspective). Like the *Corriere*, *Il Giornale* is

reticent about the geopolitical causes behind the 2015 migration wave. They are only mentioned in passing when distinguishing between those who arrive on the Italian shores from Africa, who are considered as "economic migrants" searching for better living conditions, and those who come from Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, who are fleeing from non-specified conflicts.

In 2022, only four articles in the two weeks after the beginning of the war focus exclusively on Ukrainian refugees considered as a collective: these references to the collective are embedded in articles concerning the progression of the war. This shows how much the war and the refugee crisis are perceived as cause-effect events in 2022. Moreover, personal narratives, whether in the form of stories or interviews, are often reported in great detail; sometimes they even occupy whole pages (Figure 5). These personal narratives also foreground the geopolitical scale of the crisis, as they are explicitly narratives about the tragedy of the war. Women are usually the main interviewees and they often stress how their husbands took them to the border, only to go back and fight:

> La maggioranza dei profughi sono donne e bambini. "Dove sono gli uomini?", chiediamo. "Sono rimasti per combattere", ci rispondono. Proprio in quel momento arriva camminando un uomo che è sceso da una delle automobili in fila, gli domandiamo perché non sia rimasto in Ucraina e ci dice di essere diabetico e di non potere combattere. (Giubilei 2022)

> The majority of refugees are women and children. "Where are the men?", we ask. "They stayed there to fight," they answer. In that moment a man who came out of the cars in the row walks by, we ask him why he has not stayed in Ukraine and he tells us he has diabetes and he cannot fight.

In the coverage of the 2015 crisis, there are no articles in which information about the refugee crisis is embedded in a discussion of the war in Syria, for instance. Moreover, no interviews or personal narratives are to be found. The migrants are portrayed collectively, without any attention being paid to their individual stories, a strategy that enhances the us vs. them binary. An interview by Paolo Bracalini dated September 1, 2015, aptly illustrates both a shallow attempt to define the refugee crisis on a geopolitical level and, once again, the use of a collective narrative, which is then repeated in the days that follow. The interviewee is Anna Bono, professor of African History and Institutions at the University of Turin. In the piece, she is asked to trace the profile of those who "arrivano da noi sui barconi" ("arrive in Italy on boats"). She replies:

> In maggioranza non appartengono ai ceti più poveri della società africana. Le caratteristiche che mi sembrano accomunarli sono: giovani, in prevalenza maschi, sicuramente scolarizzati anche con titoli di studio da scuola media superiore, in grande maggioranza partiti da centri urbani dove avrebbero potuto continuare a vivere, in situazioni che magari ai nostri occhi sembrano invivibili, ma che in Africa rappresentano già un traguardo rispetto alle centinaia di milioni di persone realmente in miseria. (Bracalini 2015)

> The majority does not belong to the lower classes of African society. The characteristics that they seem to have in common are: young, mainly male, surely educated and with high school diplomas, they mostly left from urban centers where they could have kept on living, in situations which may seem unlivable to us, but that represent a goal in Africa compared to the hundreds of thousands of people who truly live in poverty.

Throughout the two weeks in 2015 under examination, *Il Giornale*'s only line on the refugee crisis is to discriminate between refugees coming from Africa and those coming from the Middle East. The first are considered on continental scale: in general, African countries are bundled together and regarded as uniformly poor and with no internal geopolitical tensions, hence African refugees should be sent back, in that they are economic migrants. In another interview by Bracalini on September 8, 2015,
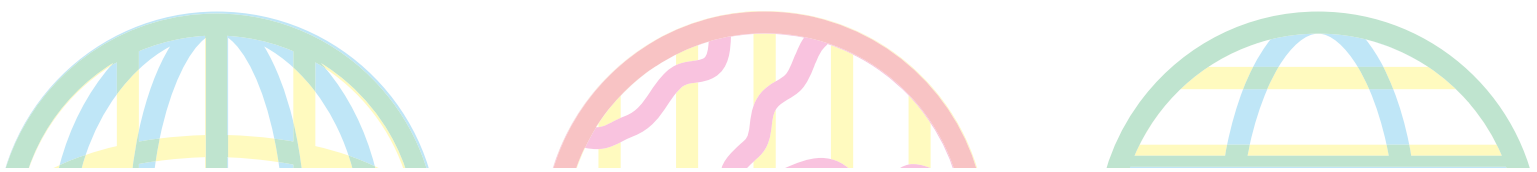
political scientist Luttwak also argues that Italy should differentiate between African economic migrants, who should be repatriated, and asylum seekers from Iraq and Syria, who should instead be welcomed and helped. Interestingly, the difference between African male migrants seeking economic benefits and asylum seekers is again mentioned in an article by Nicola Porro dated March 3, 2022, in which he highlights the pictures portraying children, women and old people, compared to "those migrations of young twenty-somethings we welcome in Italy . . . who flee from poverty, searching for economic success" (Porro 2022).

To sum up, narratives *on* migration are to be mainly found in the documentation of the 2015 refugee crisis in *Il Giornale*. Here, the dominant scale is that of the national problem created by refugees seen as a relatively undifferentiated collective. The geopolitical scale (i.e., the roots of this crisis in the Syrian conflict, among others) is rarely foregrounded. On the other hand, narratives *of* migration are more prominent in relation to the Ukraine crisis: the individual scale is foregrounded, but so are the geopolitical developments that are responsible for the "crisis." In 2022, Ukrainian refugees are often asked to tell their stories in the first person; their voices find significant space on the newspaper. By contrast, narrative agency seems to be denied in 2015, where only political or historical experts are addressed to talk about the refugee crisis.

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4. Discussion

It is important to note that this comparison between 2015 and 2022 has obvious limits: the early stages of what could be a long and bloody war in Ukraine are clearly not on a par with the 2015 crisis, which unfolded after years of civil war in Syria (and was also fueled by conflicts elsewhere). If the conflict drags on and millions of Ukrainian refugees in the EU are forced to stay, it is not hard to imagine a crop of newspaper stories about the logistical and economic challenges of integrating these refugees. In these stories, the rhetoric may well inch closer to the rhetoric of fragmentation we've seen at work in 2015. Nevertheless, it should be clear that a war between two nation states, like Russia and Ukraine, with Russian aggression on one side and heroic Ukrainian resistance on the other, can be more easily captured in a newspaper article than the complexities of the Syrian civil war—complexities that most European citizens don't understand and have limited patience for. Victor Turner (1975, 38–42) studies the temporality of what he calls "social dramas" as a sequence of "breach" (a disruptive event), "crisis," "redressive action," and "reintegration" (for example, of the group responsible for the disruption). In the case of the 2022 refugee crisis, the "breach" is unambiguously the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which is a temporally and spatially bound event, with the refugees' decision to leave their home country flowing directly from military aggression. In the case of the 2015 crisis, it is much more difficult to identify the "breach" event, given the complexity of the situation in Syria and elsewhere: ultimately, it is tempting to see the migrants' influx itself as the breach, instead of its tangled geopolitical causes. This is especially true given the pragmatic constraints on the news stories shared by the media, as well as the constraints on audiences' attentional resources.

What this means is that, in 2022, the clear-cut event structure of an invasion may have facilitated a narrative framing that established direct connections between geopolitical forces and EU-level and national responses. That is a function of the inherent "tellability" of events such as invasion, to use a narratological term—events that display a compact temporal structure, with a clear onset and an expected endpoint or resolution.[8] By contrast, this kind of linear sequentiality was largely unavailable to narratives of migration in 2015. To use Nixon's (2011) terminology, the civil war in Syria, which lasted years and is still in many ways ongoing, speaks to the "slow violence" that falls through the cracks of the narrative imagination, which privileges human-scale conflicts driven by clear intentionality. Even tracing migration patterns in 2015 to Syria is a simplification: there were other conflicts and developments, including the aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring of 2011, that arguably led to increased pressure on the European Union's borders. The deep roots of that crisis stand in stark contrast to the seemingly much more linear events of 2022—even if it is important to underline that the Russian military's invasion of Ukraine didn't happen in a vacuum but is in itself the product of a long and intricate geopolitical history.

In general, the link between war and refugees was much more straightforward in 2022 than it was in 2015. The difference is not absolute, of course: while the 2022 crisis lends itself more to narrativization that achieves integration across multiple scales, it wouldn't have been impossible to offer a more multiscalar picture of the crisis in 2015. However, journalistic conventions seemed to resist this more nuanced understanding of the crisis, and obviously the cultural and religious divides between Western audiences and Syria contributed to splitting what was effectively a single crisis into two: the refugees became part of tensions within the European Union while being decoupled from larger geopolitical developments, including the war in Syria.
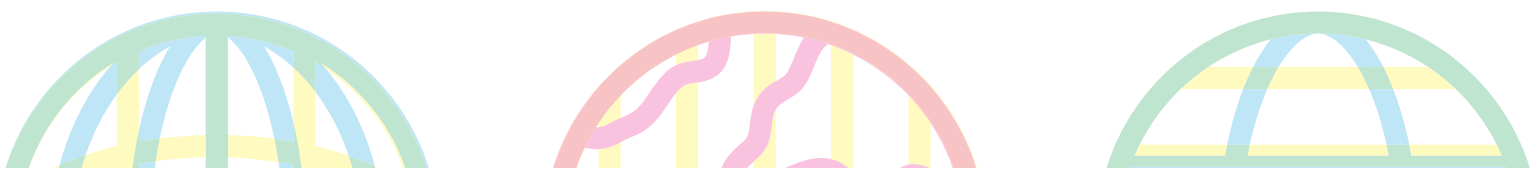
5. Conclusion

Building on theorizations of scale in the environmental humanities, this article has argued that migration is a complex phenomenon that spans multiple scales of reality, from personal experience to planetary trends such as climate change, armed conflict, and economic inequality. Stories of and on migration, too, need to confront this multiscalarity as well as the sometimes-considerable discontinuities across scalar levels, the "scale variance" (to use Woods's terminology) that separates, for example, the violence experienced by refugees from the abstract geopolitical calculus that drives this violence. Of course, storytelling is a deeply contextual practice, as scholars in sociolinguistics have long argued (see, e.g., Ochs and Capps 2001), and it may not always be possible or useful to fully account for *all* the factors shaping a given phenomenon: ultimately, a storyteller may well decide to foreground the scale that is most relevant to the communicative context or situation at hand.

Yet our discussion of how the Italian newspapers *Corriere della sera* and *Il Giornale* covered migration at the height of the 2015 crisis revealed a problematic disconnect between local, national, and regional scales, on the one hand, and geopolitical processes on the other. In the *Corriere*, news stories highlighted the fragmentation of responses to the crisis within the EU through a vocabulary (both literal and metaphorical) of division and closure. The alarmist rhetoric of *Il Giornale* presented the refugees as a threatening collective, paying little attention to their individual stories. Meanwhile, though perhaps less overtly, these narratives were also responsible for a form of fragmentation, by uncoupling the migrants from the conflicts that were at the root of their experience. Both the personal and the geopolitical scales were given short shrift. In this respect, the convergence between *Corriere* and *Il Giornale* is particularly surprising given their profoundly different political leanings. Presumably, the backgrounding of both individual experience and geopolitical factors directly played into the so-called empathy gap, making it more difficult for European citizens to understand the predicament faced by refugees and its causes.[9]

To explicate this idea, the article has drawn a comparison between the *Corriere* and *Giornale* coverage of the 2015 crisis and that of the refugee exodus caused by the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022. The comparison is imperfect: there are considerable differences between these two waves of migration. Yet, as we have argued, these differences explain, to a large extent, why newspaper stories in 2022 more easily achieved integration across scalar levels, both narratively and through metaphorical language. Salient metaphors included expressions such as Putin's "weaponization" of migration or Italy being on the "front line" of the European welcome—metaphors that created direct and unambiguous connections between the Russian attack and European as well as national policies, replacing the rhetoric of fragmentation (dominant in 2015) with one of coordination. Certainly, an event such as the Russian invasion is inherently more tellable than the slow-moving catastrophe in Syria, to name the most significant of the many causes of the 2015 crisis: that tellability, together with the seemingly linear causal link between Putin's decision and the outflow of refugees from Ukraine, helped journalists bridge the gap between global and regional scales in their storytelling.

This does *not* mean that journalistic narrative is inherently unable to come to terms with complex, multiscalar situations, of course. It only shows that extra effort is needed to overcome scale variance and create stories that can move flexibly across scales. It also suggests why such storytelling may be important: only by grasping the scope and long-term effects of migration, rather than by focusing on its immediate impact on the local level, can the public reach informed conclusions about policy. The sophisticated storytelling found in artistic practices (including literary novels) may offer inspiration for enriching media discourse by improving its grip on multiple scales of reality. Digital narrative may be equally helpful: for instance, "serious games" (Bogost 2007) have been used to render complex policy problems in an easily understandable format. Ultimately, the political and narrative challenges of migration appear to be closely related: if narrative is indeed an important factor in shaping public attitudes, crafting stories that are capable of projecting a more multifaceted, nuanced image of the causes and impacts of migration to Europe may well be the way forward.

Figure 1: Front page of the *Corriere della sera*, September 10, 2015

Figure 2: Front page of the *Corriere della sera*, March 7, 2022

Figure 3: *Il Giornale*, September 2, 2015

Figure 4: *Il Giornale*, March 9, 2022

Figure 5: *Il Giornale*, March 6, 2022.
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[1] For a recent book-length treatment of scale that resonates with our analysis here, see DiCaglio (2021).

[2] Although, as we will specify below, our perspective on scale in this article is mostly informed by work in the environmental humanities, the concept of scale has already been applied to migration in both area studies (W. A. V. Clark 1996) and sociolinguistics (Prinsloo 2017).

[3] See Heise, Christensen, and Niemann (2017) for an overview of the environmental humanities, a field that we aim to bring into a conversation with migration studies in this article.

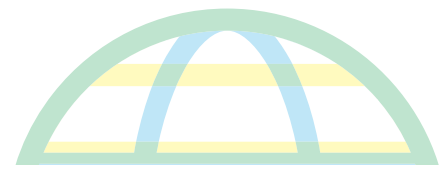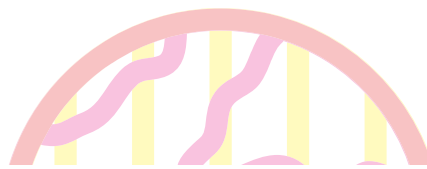[4] See again Gebauer and Sommer (2022). We return to this distinction later on in this essay.

5 Cf. also Timothy Clark's (2015) discussion of "scale effects" in literature.

6 See Sommer (2022) for more on the distinction between centrifugal and centripetal narratives in the context of EU policy.

7 That metaphor tends to map abstract phenomena onto more concrete, human-scale ones is a widely acknowledged idea in cognitive metaphor theory; see Semino (2008, 6). For more on metaphor and scale, see Caracciolo (2021, chaps. 6–7).

8 Baroni (2013) offers a useful introduction to the narratological concept of tellability.

9 "Empathy gap" is an informal term used in social psychology, referring to any shortcoming in empathetic perspective-taking. See, e.g., Van Boven and Loewenstein (2005).

opportunities

for a fair narrative on migration