

THE REFUGEE CRISIS FROM BELOW - E-CITIZENS' FRAMING AND (DE)LEGITIMATION STRATEGIES ON THE 'DEBATING EUROPE' PLATFORM

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ABSTRACT:

This study focuses on a bottom-up assessment of the refugee crisis. This transformative political and social crisis situation has stirred conflicting opinions about the ways in which EU countries should handle the refugee flow. The 'Debating Europe' platform has launched a debate upon the solutions that MEPs and EU citizens may provide in order to deter further border crossings. Using three dimensions of the circuit of civic culture, prognostic framing and legitimation strategies as theoretical frameworks, we intend to determine the degree of interaction among the e-debaters, the salience of prognostic frames and the co-occurrences of the (de)legitimation strategies that e-citizens employ in dealing with the refugee crisis. The findings show that despite the low interaction within this debate, e-citizens preferred to simply post their opinions about this crisis and to cast their online vote for the MEP's solutions. The critical assessment of the refugee crisis revealed that while some e-citizens invoke a discourse of fear or of benevolence, others highlight the importance of contextualising the situation, making a plea for conditioned solidarity and exclusive integration.

KEY WORDS:

cluster analysis, 'Debating Europe', (de)legitimation, framing, network, refugees

Introduction

Adopting decentralisation and subsidiarity¹ as its working principles, the European Union has been trying, since the beginning of the 1990s, to empower civil society by involving it into decision-making processes.² Both European institutions and organised civil societies have provided online channels to enhance

1 PÜTZ, C.: Campaign Practices Ad Survey Use in the European Commission: The Eurobarometer Survey. In KLIGEMANN, H. D., ROMMELE, A. (eds.): *Public Information Campaigns and Opinion Research. A Handbook for the Student and Practitioner*. London: Sage, 2002, p. 105-107.

2 See: SAURUGGER, S.: The Social Construction of the Participatory Turn: The Emergence of a Norm in the European Union. In *European Journal of Political Research*, 2010, Vol. 49, No. 4, p. 471-495. [online]. [2019-02-11]. Available at: <<https://ejpr.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2009.01905.x>>; BEE, C., GUERRINA, R.: Participation, Dialogue, and Civic Engagement: Understanding the Role of Organized Civil Society in Promoting Active Citizenship in the European Union. In *Journal of Civil Society*, 2014, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 29-50. [online]. [2019-04-15]. Available at: <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17448689.2013.861651>>.



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engagement, participation, and dialogic communication. Since “digital resources are crucial to sustaining a circuit of civic culture on larger scales”,³ the European Union has been trying to reduce the communication and democratic deficit by using e-platforms as communicative spaces. The public exchanges of citizens’ views in various areas of EU actions turn such online spaces into “a complex system in which permanent recontextualization takes place”.⁴ Acknowledging citizens as active consumers of information, the EU seems to have been putting into practice what Peter Dahlgren labels as “the civic culture frame”.⁵ Using the EU and civil society online outlets, people may develop into citizens by becoming “potential participants in societal development”.⁶ Launched in 2011, the ‘Debating Europe’ platform is such a digital infrastructure which claims to have been encouraging “a genuine conversation between Europe’s politicians and the citizens they serve”⁷ by taking citizens’ questions, comments and ideas directly to policy makers who will provide adequate responses. The issue of the refugee crisis has been salient in the debates launched on this platform and especially in the ‘ME&EU’ series, the latest project of the ‘Debating Europe’ platform.

Based on a bottom-up approach, this study addresses two aspects: (1) the implementation of participatory democracy on the ‘Debating Europe’ platform, a digital outlet which gives an opportunity for connecting European citizens, politicians, experts and policy makers together in an online debate;⁸ (2) the identification of e-citizens’ discursive strategies to (de)legitimise the EU actions regarding the refugee crisis and of the frames proposed to solve this crisis situation.

The ‘Debating Europe’ Platform – An Online Provider of Critical Citizenship?

Although *Friends of Europe*, one of the founding partners of the ‘Debating Europe’ platform, describes itself as “an independent think tank with a difference”,⁹ its board of trustees has a former Vice-President of the European Commission as President, and it is formed of other present or former European Commissioners and Members of the European Parliament.¹⁰ This raises the question of how the claimed independence and participatory democracy are achieved on such an online platform and how citizens may become engaged in issues concerning the European Union.

Using Peter Dahlgren’s six dimensions of the circuit of civic culture (values, affinity, knowledge, practices, identities, discussion),¹¹ we will provide an insight into the ‘Debating Europe’ platform trying to identify the degree in which these six elements of turning people into critical citizens are activated on this platform. Peter Dahlgren makes the distinction between substantive values (equality, liberty, justice, solidarity) and procedural values (openness, reciprocity, accountability, responsibility), and he makes a plea for a minimal sense of commonality among citizens as a form of affinity which, by 2009, turns into trust, namely a sense of “we-ness” around specific issues.¹² Sharing knowledge is important in digital citizenship and the various forms of transmitting knowledge

depend on the affordances of online channels. Democracy implies some recurring practices¹³ – individual, group and collective – which highlights how individuals define their identities. The pervasive question nowadays is whether identity is understood as plural. Gerard Delanty considers that the various rights associated with cultural citizenship have eroded the public/private dichotomy and have led towards cosmopolitanism which was absent from the traditional forms of citizenship, linked with the nation state.¹⁴ Thus, Delanty claims that there is a greater emphasis on personhood than peoplehood. Citizens’ talk is at the core of civic culture¹⁵ and discussion has become, besides content, a space for meeting, talking, and acting together.¹⁶

The ‘Debating Europe’ platform is structured under seven channels (Asia-Europe, Future, Global, Greener, Quality, Security, Smarter). The content and structure of the debates included in these channels comply with the following working principles:

- (a) EU citizens may leave comments under a debate or even suggest a new debate on a topic that has to do with Europe;
- (b) the platform managers arrange interviews with policy makers and experts across Europe;
- (c) the platform managers publish the reactions to the citizens’ comments and promote them through social media.¹⁷

Thus, the platform seems to encourage values that reflect e-democracy, laying an emphasis on activism, engagement, inclusiveness, or solidarity. It is reported that there is a growing 2.2 million strong community whose questions were answered so far by 2,500 policy-makers and experts from across the political spectrum; 250 MEPs, 65 national ministers and state secretaries, 41 national MPs, 13 EU Commissioners, 8 Prime Ministers and the Presidents of the European Council, the European Commission, and the European Parliament took part in the debates.¹⁸ These numbers show a broad participation and the exchange of information through the ‘comment-reply’ template that is meant to enhance knowledge sharing and networking, thus highlighting a sense of civic affinity. Under each of the seven debate channels, there are constant updates, links to other resources, infographics and videos through which knowledge is co-shaped. The last two dimensions of Peter Dahlgren’s circuit go hand in hand with the ‘Debating Europe’ platform. The main practice is conducting democracy online by taking part in the discussion. Each debate starts with an incipit where a certain situation is briefly presented, a question from a citizen is answered by a policy maker, expert or other EU representative, and then citizens are invited to post their comments and sometimes to vote online for the issue under debate.

Within the context of the rise of the Eurosceptic share of the vote at the 2014 European elections, the ‘ME&EU’ series, the latest project of the ‘Debating Europe’ platform with the support of the European Parliament, is meant “to facilitate a debate between young Europeans and policy makers on some of the most important questions facing the continent”, as it is highlighted in the 2016 report. Our choice for one debate (“How would you solve the EU’s refugee crisis?”)¹⁹ from this series has a threefold reason:

- a) firstly, the knowledge inputs of MEPs from each of the main political ideologies in the European Parliament on the issue under debate;
- b) secondly, the practice of citizens’ casting their online vote on their (dis)agreement with the MEPs’ standpoint;
- c) thirdly, the discussion about the sensitive issue of the refugee crisis, the most debated topic within the ‘ME&EU’ series.

3 COULDRY, N. et al.: Digital Citizenship? Narrative Exchange and the Changing Terms of Civic Culture. In *Citizenship Studies*, 2014, Vol. 18, No. 6-7, p. 628. [online]. [2019-03-12]. Available at: <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13621025.2013.865903>>.

4 WODAK, R., WRIGHT, S.: The European Union in Cyberspace. Multilingual Democratic Participation in a Virtual Public Sphere? In *Journal of Language and Politics*, 2006, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 255. [online]. [2019-06-17]. Available at: <<https://benjamins.com/catalog/jlp.5.2.07wod>>.

5 DAHLGREN, P.: Reconfiguring Civic Culture in the New Media Milieu. In CORNER, J., PELS, D. (eds.): *Media and the Restyling of Politics*. London: Sage, 2003, p. 153.

6 DAHLGREN, P.: Reconfiguring Civic Culture in the New Media Milieu. In CORNER, J., PELS, D. (eds.): *Media and the Restyling of Politics*. London: Sage, 2003, p. 153.

7 Welcome to Debating Europe – The Platform That Lets You Discuss YOUR Ideas with Europe’s Leaders! [online]. [2018-12-15]. Available at: <<http://www.debatingeurope.eu/about/>>.

8 Debating Europe – How It Works. [online]. [2018-12-15]. Available at: <<http://www.debatingeurope.eu/hello/>>.

9 Welcome to Debating Europe – The Platform That Lets You Discuss YOUR Ideas with Europe’s Leaders! [online]. [2018-12-15]. Available at: <<http://www.debatingeurope.eu/about/>>.

10 Friends of Europe. [online]. [2019-03-10]. Available at: <<https://www.friendsofeurope.org/>>.

11 DAHLGREN, P.: *Media and Political Engagement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 112-114.

12 DAHLGREN, P.: *Media and Political Engagement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 112-114.

13 DAHLGREN, P.: *Media and Political Engagement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 158.

14 DELANTY, G.: European Citizenship: A Critical Assessment. In *Citizenship Studies*, 2007, Vol. 11, No. 1, p. 68. [online]. [2019-02-11]. Available at: <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13621020601099872>>.

15 DAHLGREN, P.: Reconfiguring Civic Culture in the New Media Milieu. In CORNER, J., PELS, D. (eds.): *Media and the Restyling of Politics*. London: Sage, 2003, p. 159.

16 DAHLGREN, P.: *Media and Political Engagement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 114-116.

17 Welcome to Debating Europe – The Platform That Lets You Discuss YOUR Ideas with Europe’s Leaders! [online]. [2018-12-15]. Available at: <<http://www.debatingeurope.eu/about/>>.

18 Welcome to Debating Europe – The Platform That Lets You Discuss YOUR Ideas with Europe’s Leaders! [online]. [2018-12-15]. Available at: <<http://www.debatingeurope.eu/about/>>.

19 How Would You Solve the EU’s Refugee Crisis? Released on 15th October 2015. [online]. [2018-11-06]. Available at: <<http://www.debatingeurope.eu/2015/10/15/how-would-you-solve-the-eus-refugee-crisis/#.WIsYi31wPIU>>.

Insights into the Refugee Crisis – Literature Review

The UN Refugee Agency reported that in 2015 more than one million refugees and migrants reached Europe by sea, and that almost 4,000 were feared drowned.²⁰ Despite the attempts of implementing various initiatives to help the refugees (for example, ‘Mare Nostrum’ in Italy, the ‘Save Lives’ EU resettlement initiative, or the ‘Triton Operation’), the unusual human mobility in 2015 have had severe consequences for the European Union. Ataç et al. consider that “(...) instead of finding concerted responses, nation-state borders in Europe have been, in part, resurrected, causing conflicts among EU member states and a humanitarian crisis along the many borderlines, fences, and walls.”²¹ The disagreements upon the mandatory quotas, the EU countries’ failure to stop the waves of migrants and the refugees’ violent acts may be considered some of the triggers which determined citizens to take action on online platforms.

The political and social impact of the refugee crisis has been dealt with in various studies which focus on the framing of this crisis situation. We will briefly present some findings which will be used throughout our research. The refugees’ violence acts at the end of 2015 (terrorist attacks in Paris, sexual assaults and robberies in Cologne) triggered a switch from acts of solidarity to discourses of fear. This clearly highlights that the refugee crises, wherever they happen, may be considered “politically contested and emotionally charged.”²² Ataç et al. mention that refugees started to be represented as potential terrorists, criminals or rapists who destroy the social and moral fabric of Europe.²³ This dehumanisation of the refugees in 2015 and 2016 is consistent with the findings of the 2010 – 2012 media portrayals of immigrants in the UK. Scott Blinder and William L. Allen’s study of the coverage of immigration in the British national press shows that the depictions of migrants as “illegal immigrants” and “failed asylum seekers” underlie public attitudes. Leaving aside the issues of numerous workers, students and family members, the two authors consider that the British press constructs “the notion of immigration in selective and incomplete ways, and that public understanding of immigration (...) draw upon these partial constructions.”²⁴

Visual framing of the refugee crisis is also important since pictures may haunt us whereas narratives may help us understand, as Susan Sontag claims.²⁵ Xu Zhang and Lea Hellmueller’s comparative study between the visual coverage of *CNN International* and *Der Spiegel* clearly shows the degree of political involvement in such a global crisis. Whereas *CNN International* laid more emphasis on the ‘human interest’ and ‘lose/gain’ frames by using close-ups and tracking shots in order to draw attention to humanity, *Der Spiegel* brought two other frames, namely ‘law and control’ and ‘xenophobia’. If power was framed in the two news outlets showing the relationship between guards and refugees (*Der Spiegel*) and between humanitarian aid workers and refugees (*CNN International*),²⁶ the ideological level of visual framing was differently represented in the Europe’s Refugee Crisis themed debate series on the ‘Debating Europe’ platform. Unlike in the two news outlets, this platform featured another potential conflict, the source of this

conflict being not the refugees, but the demonstrators from EU countries who protested against the closing of borders. This visual framing of EU citizens willing to accept refugees shows that “the visual coverage of an issue is influenced by who has control over information and image flows. Through this visual plea of the integration of refugees, the ‘Debating Europe’ platform transmits the EU position regarding the refugee crisis, namely to provide humanitarian protection.”²⁷

Besides media representations of refugees and migrants, another top-down approach to migration focuses on thematic analysis of issue priorities regarding migration in online documents of European civil society organisations, such as The European Council on Refugees and Exiles and The European Network against Racism.²⁸ The representation through organised migrant inclusion interests headquartered in Brussels is rendered through five main issue priorities: legal and educational issues, integration support and services, political participation and activism, rights and citizenship, and availability of public information and debate over migration-related issues. In our bottom-up approach to the refugee crisis, we will use these five issues as starting points of our discussion upon e-citizens’ solutions to this crisis situation.

Conceptual Framework: Framing Processes and Discursive Strategies of (De)Legitimation

Since online users and MEPs were asked to provide solutions for the migrant crisis within the ‘ME&EU’ debate series (“How would you solve the EU’s refugee crisis?”) and users could vote on MEP’s insights on the refugee crisis, we consider that citizens become (de)legitimizers of MEPs’ solutions, but also providers of new ways of solving this problem. Thus our focus rests on the frames and discursive strategies used to legitimate the social practices and policies as they are embedded in e-debaters’ comments and MEPS’ interviews.

This forging for new citizens-driven solutions for the refugee crisis determined us to employ in our study Benford and Snow’s framing processes²⁹ and Van Leeuwen’s legitimation discursive strategies.³⁰ Action frames have an action-oriented function and that they involve interactive, discursive processes. The action-oriented function refers to three core framing tasks: diagnostic (problem identification and attributions of responsibility), prognostic (proposals of solutions to the problem, plans of attack) and motivational (socially-constructed vocabularies of motive to call to action). In our study, we will mainly start from prognostic framing since the title of the debate (“How would you solve the EU’s refugee crisis?”) induces the explicit identification of solutions. We will determine the diagnostic framing within the (de)legitimation strategies used by e-debaters (citizens and MEPs) as justifications and rationalisations for taking a certain course of action due to the practices of some global, European, or national social actors.

Since the prognostic framing is articulated through verbal texts and citizens are empowered to provide solutions, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and especially the legitimation discursive strategies, seem appropriate to tackle how the framing processes were discursively achieved. Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak consider that discourse “(...) constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it.”³¹ Teun Van Dijk suggests

20 UNHCR – The UN Refugee Agency. [online]. [2019-03-27]. Available at: <<https://www.unhcr.org/news-and-stories.html>>.

21 ATAÇ, I., RYGIEL, K., STIERL, M.: Introduction: The Contentious Politics of Refugee and Migrant Protest and Solidarity Movements: Remaking Citizenship from the Margins. In *Citizenship Studies*, 2016, Vol. 20, No. 5, p. 528. [online]. [2019-06-17]. Available at: <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13621025.2016.1182681>>.

22 See: BLEIKER, R. et al.: The Visual Dehumanisation of Refugees. In *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 2013, Vol. 48, No. 4, p. 398-416.

23 ATAÇ, I., RYGIEL, K., STIERL, M.: Introduction: The Contentious Politics of Refugee and Migrant Protest and Solidarity Movements: Remaking Citizenship from the Margins. In *Citizenship Studies*, 2016, Vol. 20, No. 5, p. 528. [online]. [2019-06-17]. Available at: <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13621025.2016.1182681>>.

24 BLINDER, S., ALLEN, W.: Constructing Immigrants: UK Press Portrayals of Migrant Groups, 2010-2012. In *International Migration Review*, 2016, Vol. 50, No. 1, p. 33. [online]. [2019-03-17]. Available at: <<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/imre.12206>>.

25 SONTAG, S.: *Regarding the Pain of Others*. London: Penguin Books, 2004, p. 31.

26 For more information about above-mentioned comparative study, see: ZHANG, X., HELLMUELLER, L.: Visual Framing of the European Refugee Crisis in Der Spiegel and CNN International: Global Journalism in News Photographs. In *International Communication Gazette*, 2017, Vol. 79, No. 5, p. 483-510. [online]. [2019-06-17]. Available at: <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1748048516688134>>.

27 CMECIU, C.: Visualizing Europe’s Refugee Crisis on the ‘Debating Europe’ Platform. In *Styles of Communication*, 2017, Vol. 9, No. 1, p. 91. [online]. [2019-01-17]. Available at: <<http://stylesofcomm.fjssc.unibuc.ro/archives/vol-9-no-1>>.

28 See: SCHNYDER, M.: The Representation of Migrant and Refugee Interests by European Umbrella Organisations: Evidence of Strain? In *Journal of European Integration*, 2016, Vol. 38, No. 7, p. 743-756. [online]. [2019-02-11]. Available at: <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07036337.2016.1227326?journalCode=geui20>>.

29 See: BENFORD, R. D., SNOW, D. A.: Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment. In *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2000, Vol. 26, p. 611-639. [online]. [2019-05-21]. Available at: <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/223459?seq=1/subjects>>.

30 For more information about Van Leeuwen’s legitimation discursive strategies, see: VAN LEEUWEN, T.: *Discourse and Practice. New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

31 FAIRCLOUGH, N., WODAK, R.: Critical Discourse Analysis. In VAN DIJK, T. A. (ed.): *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction. Vol. 2: Discourse as Social Interaction*. London: Allen Lane, 1997, p. 258.

that critical discourse analysis “*primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequities are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context*”.³²

The two-way communication on which online platforms are based reveals that legitimisation may also be performed by citizens as online power-holders. Through their comments as texts, e-citizens enact what Theo Van Leeuwen labels as “recontextualisation”.³³ Besides transforming social practices into discourses, recontextualisation adds the contextually specific legitimations of these practices. Thus e-citizens’ comments-as-solutions to the refugee crisis act as what Norman Fairclough identifies as “systems of knowledge of belief”³⁴ situated within the power relations such as those between MEPs and EU citizens, refugees and EU social actors or between EU citizens as e-debaters.

We consider that the textual analyses of e-citizens’ comments and MEPs’ interviews seen as framing processes, are valuable resources for determining how (de)legitimation is discursively achieved in the case of the refugee crisis. In our analysis, we will employ Van Leeuwen’s four discursive legitimisation strategies:

- *Authorisation* – “legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom, law, and/or persons in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested”.
- *Moral evaluation* – “legitimation by (often very oblique) reference to value systems”.
- *Rationalisation* – “legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action and to the knowledges that society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity”.
- *Mythopoesis* – “legitimation conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish nonlegitimate actions”.³⁵

Methodology

We employ a network and a framing analysis of the debate “How would you solve the EU’s refugee crisis?”, launched within the ‘ME&EU’ debate series on 15th October 2015. Our sample included 7 interviews with MEPs (from Radical Left, Social Democrats, Greens, Liberal Democrats, Central Right, Conservatives and Eurosceptics) and 263 comments of e-citizens (the first comment was posted on 15th October 2015 and the last one on 31st October 2016).

Using a network analysis (NodeXL Pro), we want to determine the interaction mapping, by analysing the graph density, the group by cluster and the top ten debaters (vertices) ranked by betweenness centrality. We imported the interviews and the comments into QDA miner 5, a qualitative data analysis tool optimised for coding, annotating, and analysing textual information. The QDA miner codes, under the form of (de) legitimisation strategies for various types of prognostic framing, facilitated a cluster analysis of coding co-occurrences.

Prognostic Framing

The study employs both a deductive and an inductive method. The MEP’s interviews and e-citizens’ comments were examined for specific prognostic frames that emerged inductively within and across the 270 texts. We created a categorisation scheme, which included five prognostic frames: deportation (D), repatriation (R), humanitarianism (H), peace (P), exclusive integration support (EIS). Whereas the deportation frame refers to textual accounts of expulsion of refugees from EU countries, the repatriation frame includes references to a voluntary process of returning migrants to their place of origin. While the humanitarianism frame includes accounts to benevolence and sympathy social practices towards all refugees, the exclusive

32 VAN DIJK, T. A.: Critical Discourse Analysis. In SCHIFFRIN, D., TANNEN, D., HAMILTON, E. H. (eds.): *The Handbook of Critical Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2001, p. 352.

33 VAN LEEUWEN, T.: *Discourse and Practice. New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 105.

34 FAIRCLOUGH, N.: *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. New York: Longman, Pearson, 1995, p. 6.

35 VAN LEEUWEN, T.: *Discourse and Practice. New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 105-106.

integration support frame embeds those utterances which impose certain restrictions for accepting migrants. Education as a prognostic frame refers to inclusion through educating refugee children and adults. Under each of these five frames, we included the above-mentioned discursive (de)legitimation strategies (authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation, mythopoesis). A content analysis of a sample of online texts (n = 40), approximately 15% of the total number (270) was double-coded to determine inter-coder reliability (Kappa) and the agreement between the two coders was .88 on average.

Research Questions

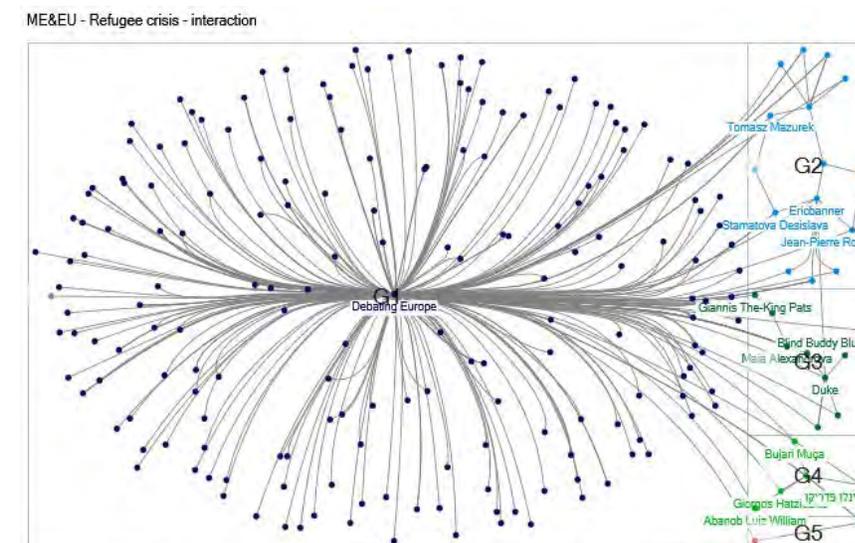
The research questions that we want to address regarding the interaction (RQ1 and RQ2) among e-debaters and MEPs on the issue of refugee crisis and the prognostic frames (RQ3) and (de)legitimation strategies (RQ4) are the following:

- RQ1:** How dense is the interaction among the e-citizens?
- RQ2:** How many groups are formed among e-citizens and which e-debaters act as top influencers?
- RQ3:** Which specific prognostic frames are used by e-citizens and MEPs as solutions to the refugee crisis?
- RQ4:** How do the (de)legitimation strategies and solutions cluster together?

Results

Interaction among E-citizens on the Refugee Crisis

In order to examine the *discussion* component at the level of the interaction we performed a network analysis. The network was obtained from the NodeXL Graph Server on 21st November 2016. The directed chart (Figure 1) represents a network of 270 texts (interviews and comments) posted in the ‘ME&EU’ debate series on the issue of refugee crisis. The graph’s vertices were grouped by cluster using the Clauset-Newman-Moore cluster algorithm. The graph was laid out using the Harel-Koren Fast Multiscale layout algorithm.



Created with NodeXL Pro (<http://nodexl.codeplex.com>) from the Social Media Research Foundation (<http://www.smrfoundation.org>)

Figure 1: Network analysis – e-debaters on the refugee crisis (ME&EU debate series – Debating Europe platform)

Source: Own processing created by use the programme: NodeXL Pro. [online]. [2019-02-02]. Available at: <<http://nodexl.codeplex.com>>; Social Media Research Foundation. [online]. [2019-02-02]. Available at: <<http://smrfoundation.org>>.

As the graph metrics shows (Table 1), there were 213 e-debaters (vertices) who took part in this debate and there were formed 5 groups by cluster. The network density as the ratio of existing possible connections among e-debaters in the network provides insight into the first part of RQ1 of how much the e-debaters are networked together. The value of 0.010408362 is considered of low estimate,³⁶ which proves that the ties created by the active users for this specific debate on the refugee crisis issue present a low numerical value.

Table 1: Graph metrics – Debate “How would you solve the EU’s refugee crisis?”

Graph Metric	Value
Graph Type	Directed
Vertices	213
Total Edges	276
Graph Density	0.010408362
Groups	5

Source: Own processing created by use the programme: NodeXL Pro. [online]. [2019-02-02]. Available at: <<http://nodexl.codeplex.com/>>; Social Media Research Foundation. [online]. [2019-02-02]. Available at: <<http://smrfoundation.org/>>.

The Clauset-Newman-Moore cluster algorithm allowed us to determine how the vertices (e-debaters) were connected to one another (RQ2). As observed, there were five groups formed. The first group contained the highest number of e-debaters (182), but there was no interaction among them. Starting with the second group, the number of vertices clustering together is significantly lower: G2 – 15 e-debaters, G3 – 9 e-debaters, G4 – 5 e-debaters, and G5 – 2 e-debaters. In order to determine the top ten e-debaters (RQ2), we used betweenness centrality, which represents the degree of which vertices stand between each other. Since four e-debaters had the same value of betweenness centrality, we included 13 top e-debaters in the network analysis. The hierarchy of e-debaters who acted as top influences on the refugee crisis issue, in terms of their betweenness centrality value, is the following: Debating Europe, Ericbanner, Jean-Pierre Rosa, Tomasz Mazurek, Duke, Maia Alexandrova, Stamatova Desislava, Giannis The-King Pats, Blind Buddy Blues, Bujari Muca, Giorgos Hatzidakis, Abanob Luiz William.

Prognostic Framing on the Refugee Crisis – Types of Solutions

The prognostic framing in the e-citizens’ comments³⁷ centred on the frame of deportation, peace, exclusive integration support and humanitarianism (see Figure 2). Unlike the seven MEPs who make a plea for humanitarianism in their interviews, the e-debaters placed this solution based on charity, benevolence, and kindness in fourth place (17.1%).

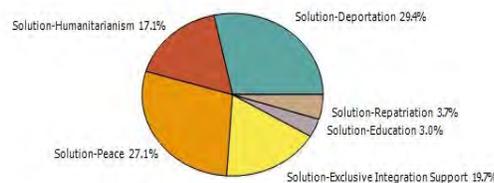


Figure 2: Salience of e-citizens’ solutions on the refugee crisis

Source: Own processing created by use the programme: QDA Miner 5.05.15. [online]. [2019-02-02]. Available at: <<https://provalisresearch.com/news-events/qda-miner-5-released/>>.

³⁶ The measure for density can vary from 0 to 1, the density of a complete graph being 1. For more information, see: SCOTT, J.: *Social Network Analysis*. London: Sage, 2013.

³⁷ Note: The e-debaters’ comments will be reproduced as they were written by the debaters (their typos and other grammatical and stylistic imperfections are included as well).

The refugees’ ousting from Europe was represented through a twofold framing: **the deportation frame** (29.4%) and **the exclusive integration support frame** (19.7%). Whereas the e-debaters using the deportation frame referred to all refugees, others clearly expressed the polarisation between legal and illegal refugees, thus appealing to a solution based on integration for the former category. Within the deportation frame, the most active e-debaters provided various solutions ranging from an **ousting of all refugees** (“*Boats along with immigrants should be escorted back out of EU waters to Middle East and Africa*”, Tomasz Mazurek, 8th November 2015), to **expulsion to other new and safe territories** (“*Collecting money from the affected countries and buying a greek Island for them. Two Problems solved. The refugees have a new home and greek some money.*”), Abanob Luiz William, 15th October 2015). Other e-debaters also mention this latter solution, **safe deportation**, but associated with the (rich) countries nearby (“*Simple! Nearby the refugees have rich countries with the same culture and the same habits like Arabia, so why the hell they don’t go there?*”, Jorge Lux, 30th June 2016). The exclusive integration support frame was elaborated by expressing the acceptance conditions for refugees:

- **legal documentation** (“*Freedom of movement should only apply to those who respect frontiers and provide correct documentation.*”, Ericbanner, 19th October 2015);
- **political persecution** (“*If a person is persecuted because of his/her political views, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc., that person should only be able to apply for asylum at EU members’ foreign embassies and never in Europe.*”, Hector Niehues-Jeufrroy, 9th September 2016);
- **existence of an employment contract** (“*(...) driving back out those who entered the EU without an official request from a boss which engages in employing them (...)*”, Franck Néo Legon, 31st January 2016);
- **EU belonging** (“*(...) cancel all social benefits for non EU immigrants for first 10 years*”, Tomasz Mazurek, 15th October 2015).³⁸

The peace frame is associated with shifting the blame on to others (Germany, USA, and Russia) for **invading the Middle East** and for **being arms suppliers**. As mentioned above, the humanitarianism frame was not as much used by e-debaters as it was by the MEPs interviewed. The appeal to citizens’ desire to solidarity and help was emphasised either through **compassion** (“*(...) ask: what the needs of them, find home, even from one room, find the job for that people, people are human, even what status they came from!*”, Stamatova Desislava, 15th October 2015), or **human rights** (“*Refugees are protected by international law? it is therefore our duty, as civilized people, to provide them with asylum*”, Duke, 16th October 2015). Some e-debaters made a plea for solidarity with the refugees but forged some conditions for this humanitarian aid: **education** (“*If possible, try to provide young refugees with basic education and vocational training*”, Hector Niehues-Jeufrroy, 9th September 2016) and **repatriation** (“*So they can return home as soon as the crisis clears.*”, Eugenia Serban, 1st February 2016).³⁹

Solutions and (De)Legitimation Strategies – Cluster Analysis

Through a cluster analysis,⁴⁰ we wanted to determine the patterns among the codes (solutions and strategies) in terms of their co-occurrences. Since co-occurrence of codes implies a semantic similarity, we will label the clusters of codes (solutions and legitimation strategies) as larger topics which can be revealed from the internal organisation of the debate on the refugee crisis. Five clusters were formed that we have grouped into four main topics:

³⁸ The analysed comments can be seen online: *How Would You Solve the EU’s Refugee Crisis?* [online]. [2017-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.debatingeurope.eu/2015/10/15/how-would-you-solve-the-eu-refugee-crisis/#.XZh3a3duKxQ>>.

³⁹ The analysed comments can be seen online: *How Would You Solve the EU’s Refugee Crisis?* [online]. [2017-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.debatingeurope.eu/2015/10/15/how-would-you-solve-the-eu-refugee-crisis/#.XZh3a3duKxQ>>.

⁴⁰ Note: The conditions for the dendrogram were the following: for *clustering* – occurrence (Within case), index (Jaccard’s coefficient); for *multidimensional scaling options* – tolerance – 0.000001, maximum iterations – 500.

- *Blame-shifting* topic: (Solution-Deportation, D-Moral Evaluation, D-Rationalisation) + (D-Authorisation, D-Mythopoesis).
- *(Exclusive) Humanitarian Aid* topic: Solution-Exclusive Integration Support, EIS-Moral Evaluation, EIS-Rationalisation) + (P-Authorisation, EIS-Authorisation) + (Solution-Humanitarianism, H-Rationalisation, H-Moral Evaluation, H-Authorisation).
- *Return of the Refugees* topic: (Solution-Peace, P-Rationalisation, P-Moral Evaluation) + (Solution-Repatriation, R-Rationalisation).
- *Enlightenment* topic: E-Rationalisation, E-Authorisation, E-Mythopoesis, H-Humanitarianism, Solution-Education.

The Blame-shifting Topic

The prognostic framing of deportation (D) is characterised by the e-citizens' struggle to delegitimise the refugees' flow and the EU representatives who support their arrival mainly through the use of moral evaluation and rationalisation strategies. The interrelation of these two strategies is obvious since the e-debaters' mentioning of the refugees' social actions (as the rationalisation strategy) may evoke a value system (moral evaluation strategy). Using explicit negative judgments of the refugees ("invaders", "illegal", "scumbags", "criminals" or "aggressive") or of their arrival seen as a threat ("a premeditated and organized plan to destroy Europe and Europeans", Ainhoa Lizar, 6th November 2015), e-debaters tried to downplay their social actions and affective stances of rejection are explicitly evoked through negative-laden nouns ("invasion", "colonization"). For example, Ericbanner condemns their bullying into European countries (19th October 2015) and he considers that this action justifies their deportation. Another debater, Vicente Silva Tavares, uses rationalisation by referring to their unacceptable practices which may serve as possible reasons for deportation: "We are being invaded by people that do not want to integrate, that refuse our laws, and believe in a religion that says they have the task to convert the infidels or kill them" (20th October 2015).⁴¹

The strategy of authorisation by reference to EU leaders, such as Alexis Tsipras and Angela Merkel, is interrelated with rationalisation in order to delegitimise their actions. Whereas the Greek PM is blamed for "his policy of the open borders" which had "a big impact for the accumulation of refugees" (Dimitris Orfanoudis, 30th June 2016), Angela Merkel is accused of having said she would accept 1 million refugees (Hugo Dias, 31st January 2016). One debater provides an illustrative example of rationalisation of deportation as beneficial by suggesting a future course of action for the MEPs: "First you should take care of your people, and then think about the others. Europe is too small to give home to all nations from other continents" (Malgorzata, 6th November 2015).⁴²

Another strategy of legitimation used by e-debaters is mythopoesis, which includes narrative style representations to provide evidence for deportation. Maia Alexandrova's stories about Hungary's and Bulgaria's foreign occupations are impinged with expert authority: "Listen more to countries who have already experienced foreign occupations, especially forced Islamic rule, such as Hungary and Bulgaria, for example. (...) It took Bulgaria 500 years and the help of Russia to gain its freedom from the barbaric, Islamic State-like rule of the Ottoman Empire in 1878. Bulgarians are strongly against another invasion by aggressive Muslims, regardless of what Merkel or EU think. Experience is everything." (Maia Alexandrova, 16th October 2015).⁴³ More debaters use the expert authority legitimation strategy to make a plea for deportation, by evoking incidents provoked by aggressive refugees in various EU countries, such as Sweden, UK, or France, which have had experience in dealing with the refugee crisis.

41 The analysed comments can be seen online: *How Would You Solve the EU's Refugee Crisis?* [online]. [2017-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.debateurope.eu/2015/10/15/how-would-you-solve-the-eus-refugee-crisis/#.XZh3a3duKxQ>>.

42 The analysed comments can be seen online: *How Would You Solve the EU's Refugee Crisis?* [online]. [2017-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.debateurope.eu/2015/10/15/how-would-you-solve-the-eus-refugee-crisis/#.XZh3a3duKxQ>>.

43 The analysed comment can be seen online: *How Would You Solve the EU's Refugee Crisis?* [online]. [2017-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.debateurope.eu/2015/10/15/how-would-you-solve-the-eus-refugee-crisis/#.XZh3a3duKxQ>>.

The (Exclusive) Humanitarian Aid Topic

This topic embeds two sub-clusters focused on exclusive integration support and humanitarianism. Both of these sub-clusters are based on humanitarian aid but the former actually implies the existence of some conditions to which refugees should comply. Unlike the legitimization strategies of moral evaluation and rationalisation associated with deportation, these two strategies in relation to exclusive integration support are targeted only at some groups of refugees. The e-debaters also used the moral evaluation strategy to qualify some refugees: "people-traffickers and people-smugglers (...) illegal business in swamping Europe" (Nick the Greek, 18th October 2015). E-debaters used an implicit polarisation (legal versus illegal) through moral evaluation: "welcome real refugees, give them a feeling home" (Geert Elemans, 30th July 2016). Duke explicitly expresses negative valence to "religious fanaticism and sectarian violence" (16th October 2015) and he mentions the French example of banning burqas or niqabs from public places as role model authority to legitimise this exclusive integration as long as refugees comply with the cultural context of the respective country. The strategy of rationalisation by reference to future social practices which should be taken by EU countries is present. For example, Christian Morresi (9th September 2016) considers that the establishment of a Common European Asylum System would be beneficial for sorting real refugees. Border protection is greatly mentioned by e-citizens as a measure to justify the acceptance of refugees who fulfil certain conditions. It is interesting to observe that from among all the MEPs interviewed, Philippe de Backer (ALDE), who acted as an expert authority, was the only politician who used the rationalisation strategy of exclusive integration combined with repatriation as beneficial for the EU: "(...) And people who are not eligible for political asylum should be sent back. So, strong frontier protection is also important, and we need to find a common strategy to deal with economic migration."⁴⁴

Another category of e-citizens evoked humanitarian aid targeted at all refugees. We think that this discursive positioning is actually induced by all seven MEPs who made a plea for human rights and solidarity set in the Treaties. Some e-debaters justify the utility of humanitarianism as the historical duty of Europe and as a possible shift of roles in the future: "Don't close the borders (...). Te hospitality os a duty, we have the obligation to give to te refugees a home. If we don't do receive them, we are not civilized people at all. The history give us lessons. And today they need us, tomorrow it will be the contrary." (Helena Gonçalves, 15th October 2015).⁴⁵

Positive and negative valence syntagms ("provide treatment humane", "we are not civilized people at all", "the repressive approach to immigration", etc.) are used within the moral evaluation strategy to delegitimise the EU's failure to solve this crisis.

The Return of the Refugees Topic

This theme interrelates two sub-clusters which may be interpreted as cause (peace) and effect (repatriation). The war in the Middle East is explained through some EU countries' social actions of bombing the refugees' countries, of selling guns, or of giving money to Saudi Arabia. These rationalisations used to delegitimise the EU actions are closely linked to a negative affective stance targeted towards EU representatives who are labelled as "idiots" (Σαντυ Παλαμπαγάδη, 30th June 2016), as "criminals (...) spending all our money in the wars" (Marinela Marija Đakovic, 30th June 2016) or as hypocrites for not admitting being the real cause for the unstable situation in the Middle East (Sofia-Maria Prentou, 30th June 2016).⁴⁶

44 The analysed comments can be seen online: *How Would You Solve the EU's Refugee Crisis?* [online]. [2017-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.debateurope.eu/2015/10/15/how-would-you-solve-the-eus-refugee-crisis/#.XZh3a3duKxQ>>.

45 The analysed comment can be seen online: *How Would You Solve the EU's Refugee Crisis?* [online]. [2017-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.debateurope.eu/2015/10/15/how-would-you-solve-the-eus-refugee-crisis/#.XZh3a3duKxQ>>.

46 The analysed comments can be seen online: *How Would You Solve the EU's Refugee Crisis?* [online]. [2017-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.debateurope.eu/2015/10/15/how-would-you-solve-the-eus-refugee-crisis/#.XZh3a3duKxQ>>.

The prognostic framing of peace as a solution is also mentioned by two MEPs (Philippe de Backer – ALDE and Laura Ferrara – EFD, Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs – Eurosceptics). Their rationalisations reflect two contradictory ideological positions towards the same problem. Whereas the representative of the Liberal Democrats frames the European community as a helper who needs to invest more to create peace, the representative of the Eurosceptics acknowledges the sales of arms as a destructive practice for instability in countries like Syria, Libya, and others.

Peace as a condition for refugees' return to their countries is evoked by some e-debaters. Their rationalisation of repatriation as beneficial for the refugees is justified through the EU's further negotiations for repatriation agreements (Christian Morresi, 15th October 2015) or through possible repatriation programmes (Sarah EsEs, 15th October 2015).⁴⁷

The Enlightenment Topic

The legitimisation strategy of rationalisation by referring to the utility of education is targeted both at refugees ("to contribute their share to the country where they are received", OliverH, 28th November 2015) and at EU citizens ("to prevent outburst of ignorance, racism, and violence", Matej Zaggy Zagorc, 9th September 2016). Rationalisation is interrelated with authorisation and mythopoesis. For example, one e-debater frames himself as a personal authorial voice telling his own story as a refugee mentor: "I am personally mentoring, one is an MD, one is a lawyer, one an engineer, one was studying economics and one is an IT specialist. And that's very much representative for refugees from Syria." (OliverH, 28th November 2015).⁴⁸

Comparisons in discourse have a (de)legitimising function⁴⁹ and analogies are another way of expressing moral evaluation. Education as a solution to the refugee crisis is legitimised by the use of moral analogy through the 'EU as a decaying building' metaphor. Matej Zaggy Zagorc's comparison between the EU and a building is achieved through an implicit polarisation between bad (mending the surface structure) versus good (mending the deep structure): "Repairing the roof of a building will solve nothing if the foundations are crumbling." (9th September 2016).⁵⁰

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study we have examined how e-debaters may develop into critical e-citizens by becoming "potential participants in societal development"⁵¹ through three dimensions of the circuit of civic culture: knowledge, practices, and discussion. The 'Debating Europe' platform, within the 'ME&EU' debate series, invited citizens to propose solutions for the refugee crisis, thus giving them agency by treating them as possible initiators of new refugee management plans. Since the refugee crisis triggered the active involvement of institutions, the *knowledge* component was activated through a twofold type of accounts: on the one hand, interviews of the MEPs from each of the main political parties in the European Parliament, and on the other hand, e-citizens' comments as verbal accounts of possible solutions to this crisis situation. The content analysis showed a discrepancy between MEPs' and e-citizens' solutions. Whereas the majority of the MEPs made a plea solely for humanitarianism and solidarity, thus complying with the Treaties, the e-debaters' prognostic framing focused, mainly, on deportation, peace, and exclusive integration support. The *practice* component of

casting an online vote for the MEPs' standpoints clearly showed that e-citizens preferred those politicians who mentioned other solutions besides humanitarian aid. The e-participants agreed more (41%) with the ALDE representative who considered that "to create peace in that region" and "to have clear rules about who can enter and who cannot" should be two important means of solving the refugee crisis. The next two positions in the e-citizens' preference focus on acknowledging the EU failure in dealing with this situation. Whereas the PES representative admits the EU lack of resilience (15% of the votes), the Eurosceptic representative's argument is linked to the sales of arms to countries involved in the conflicts (14% of the votes).

We examined the *discussion* component at the level of the interaction degree among e-debaters and at the textual level embedded in their comments. Using a network analysis, we found that out of the 213 participants, only 31 interacted among them (five groups), thus activating the 'comment-reply' function of the platform. Despite this low degree of interaction, the e-participants provided prognostic frames of deportation, peace, exclusive integration support, humanitarianism, repatriation, and education as remedies to the refugee crisis. Through the use of the (de)legitimisation strategies of rationalisation, authorisation, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis,⁵² e-citizens do not fully accept the solidarity discourse promoted by the EU representatives. The cluster analysis on the discursive strategies showed the salience of four major topics used by e-debaters in legitimising their solutions: blame-shifting, (exclusive) humanitarian aid, return of the refugees, and enlightenment. Within the e-debaters' discourses of legitimising deportation, the strategies of moral evaluation and rationalisation are interrelated. Depicted as criminals or illegal immigrants, refugees as a group are blamed for their acts of violence, thus justifying their ousting from the EU. The EU representatives, such as Alexis Tsipras and Angela Merkel, are represented as delegitimised expert authorities who are also responsible for this flow of refugees.

Despite the discourse of fear promoted by supporters of deportation, there is another group of e-debaters who made a plea for exclusive humanitarian aid. Their accounts reveal their desire to accept the refugees as long as they comply with certain conditions imposed by the European Union. They legitimate exclusive integration support by polarisations between legal versus illegal refugees and by justifying the establishment of a system which may help in sorting real refugees. The frames of peace and repatriation were included within the 'return of the refugees' topic. Most of the delegitimising evaluations reflected negative valence targeted towards the EU and US social practices of invading other territories or of selling weapons to countries in civil wars. In the e-citizens' opinions, these past actions should serve as moral obligations and should justify the necessity of restoring peace within these territories and the future benefits that the negotiations for repatriation agreements may bring for the refugees' lives. Education targeted both at refugees and EU citizens determined us to label the last cluster as the 'enlightenment' topic. It reflects not only the idea of literacy, but also a mentality change in accepting other's culture, way of life, or religion. The personal authorial voice is used to provide some narrative style representations of the interaction with refugees involved in the mentoring process.

Although the strategy of mythopoesis associated with the education frame was not highly used, it brings a new perspective into the refugee crisis because it may counter the stereotypical views implicitly expressed in the deportation frame. Acknowledging that these people should not be perceived as peoplehood, but rather as personhood⁵³ may be a solution of downplaying the dehumanisation pattern⁵⁴ linked to refugees.

If we exclude the two extremes of the prognostic framing, namely deportation of all refugees or humanitarian aid for all refugees, we may observe that the e-citizens' critical assessment of the refugee crisis reflects a plea for contextualising the situation, thus switching from a discourse of fear or a discourse of unrestricted benevolence to acts of conditioned solidarity and integration.

47 The analysed comments can be seen online: *How Would You Solve the EU's Refugee Crisis?* [online]. [2017-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.debatingeurope.eu/2015/10/15/how-would-you-solve-the-eus-refugee-crisis/#.XZh3a3duKxQ>>.

48 The analysed comments can be seen online: *How Would You Solve the EU's Refugee Crisis?* [online]. [2017-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.debatingeurope.eu/2015/10/15/how-would-you-solve-the-eus-refugee-crisis/#.XZh3a3duKxQ>>.

49 VANLEEUEWEN, T.: *Discourse and Practice. New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 111.

50 The analysed comments can be seen online: *How Would You Solve the EU's Refugee Crisis?* [online]. [2017-11-10]. Available at: <<https://www.debatingeurope.eu/2015/10/15/how-would-you-solve-the-eus-refugee-crisis/#.XZh3a3duKxQ>>.

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