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Shifting Currents: *Hespress* and *El País* Framing of Irregular Migration Before and After Spain's Recognition of the Moroccan Sahara

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how *Hespress* and *El País* have framed irregular migration before and after Spain's policy shift regarding the Sahara. The objective is to examine how a foreign policy change can influence migration narratives in national media. Methodologically, the research employs qualitative content analysis of articles from two pivotal moments: the 2021 Ceuta border crisis and the 2023 post-recognition period. During the Ceuta crisis, *Hespress* used the "Humanitarian Crisis and Abandonment" and "Colonial Mindset and Political Extortion" frames, emphasizing migrant suffering and perceived Spanish betrayal. After Spain endorsed Morocco's autonomy plan, coverage transitioned to "Partnership and Cooperation" and "Development-Driven Migration," highlighting diplomatic alignment. *El País* initially employed the frames "Instrumentalized Humanitarianism" and "EU Security and Spain's Sovereignty," portraying migrants as both victims and instruments in Morocco's strategy. Later, it adopted the "Strategic Partnership and Stability" and "Managed Migration" frames, presenting migration as structured and cooperative. The findings demonstrate how diplomatic developments can reshape media narratives. This study highlights the media's role in aligning migration framing with political agendas and shaping public perceptions of cross-border movement.

KEYWORDS

Migration
Media Framing
Morocco
Spain
Geopolitics

Introduction

For decades, the Mediterranean and Atlantic regions have served as crucial corridors for irregular migration. Because of its position, Morocco has been an important country of both origin and transit. The proximity of Moroccan shores to Europe has made the routes particularly significant. One of the busiest routes for irregular migration is the Strait of Gibraltar, which spans approximately 14 kilometers long (Lahlou 3). Moreover, the hazardous Atlantic route to the Canary Islands is also among the most frequently used migration paths (Holleis). Thousands of Moroccans and sub-Saharan Africans undertake the dangerous journey to Europe every year (Fargues 60).

However, migration dynamics in this region are not merely shaped by individual choices or structural push-pull factors; they are also deeply politicized (Pettrachin). Media narratives play a pivotal role in framing these movements, influencing public perception and policy responses. The 2021 Ceuta crisis, during which 8,000 migrants entered the Spanish enclave within 48 hours (Kasraoui), and Spain's 2022 recognition of Morocco's autonomy plan for the Sahara marked significant turning points in bilateral relations (Minder).

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This study investigates how Morocco's *Hespress* and Spain's *El País* framed irregular migration before and after Spain's 2022 Sahara policy shift. Using framing theory and qualitative textual analysis, we examine coverage of two key events: the May 2021 Ceuta border crisis (pre-shift) and the February 2023 migration wave (post-shift), revealing how these outlets constructed distinct narratives about migration flows during pivotal moments in bilateral diplomacy.

Literature Review

Migration Trends in the Mediterranean and Atlantic Regions

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the use of Mediterranean and Atlantic routes. The Canary Islands, situated around 200 kilometers from Tarfaya, have experienced an extraordinary surge in migrants during this period (*Al Jazeera*). Thousands of individuals have arrived at the archipelago, representing a sevenfold increase compared to 2019 (Godenau and Buraschi 4). This increase is attributed to the reinforcement of migration regulations along the Central Mediterranean route, compelling migrants to pursue alternative avenues. The Western Mediterranean, although closer, remains dangerous because of unpredictable weather, busy sea routes, and strict checks by European authorities (González 3).

Moroccans constitute a significant portion of those crossing these routes, reflecting deep-rooted socio-economic challenges within the country. Unemployment, especially among the youth, remains a driving force. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these issues, prompting more individuals to risk the journey (Sebastián 50). Additionally, migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, often using Morocco as a transit point, have increasingly utilized these crossings. Reports by UNHCR highlight the growing number of mixed migration flows, where individuals from diverse backgrounds converge on Moroccan shores, seeking passage to Europe (Canton 351). In 2023, over 56,000 irregular immigrants entered Morocco en route to Europe through unauthorized means (Statista Research Department).

The Moroccan government has implemented measures to curb irregular migration, including increasing patrols and working with European partners such as Spain. Nevertheless,these efforts have met with limited success (Nunez 10). Human rights organizations have criticized the approach, alleging cases of forced deportations and limited support for migrants stranded in Morocco. Meanwhile, the securitization of European borders has inadvertently increased the dangers of crossing. Smugglers frequently exploit migrant desperation, taking advantage of their vulnerability (Frontex).

Moroccan-Spanish Relations

The dynamics of Moroccan-Spanish relations are closely linked to migration issues. They are also influenced by broader geopolitical and diplomatic factors (Ruiz Diaz 5). The period from 2021 to 2024 witnessed significant developments. These included diplomatic disagreements, migration crises, and Spain's historic recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Sahara (Minder). Morocco and Spain have historically had a complex relationship. This relationship has been marked by cooperation in trade and security, but punctuated by recurring disputes involving migration, territorial waters, and the status of the Sahara (Rihne 3).

One of the most critical moments in recent Moroccan-Spanish relations occurred in 2021, during the Ceuta border crisis. Over 8,000 migrants, including minors, crossed into the Spanish territory within days. This event was widely seen as a response to Spain's decision to host

Brahim Ghali, the leader of the Polisario Front, for medical treatment (Kasraoui). Rabat viewed the move as a challenge to Morocco's territorial claims over the Sahara. The crisis highlighted the use of migration as a diplomatic tool. Morocco signaled its discontent by loosening border controls (Miholjcic 6). This incident underscored the delicate balance in Moroccan-Spanish diplomacy. Migration often intersects with broader political disputes.

In 2022, Spain recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the Sahara, shifting from its neutral stance, a move Rabat hailed as a diplomatic victory, citing its lobbying efforts and strategic role in controlling migration (Minder). However, Spanish critics argued it undermined Sahrawi self-determination. Despite this progress, tensions remain over fishing rights, territorial disputes (Rihne 2), and Morocco's use of migration as leverage in EU negotiations, highlighting its strategy of trading geopolitical influence for political and economic gains (Lahlou 5).

Media Framing of Migration

The way the media frames irregular migration has a significant impact on public opinion. It affects opinions and choices about policy. Media framing has an impact on how people perceive a certain topic based on the coverage they choose to adopt (Entman 51). Liberal media tend to place more emphasis on the humanitarian aspects of migration, whereas conservative media highlight crime and security (Cisneros 3). Media coverage in Europe varies by nation and is influenced by local political environments and historical migration trends (Carvalho et al. 117).

In Spain, Rodríguez-Pérez et al. remark that the media predominantly employ a political frame rather than a social or human-interest perspective (167). Migrants are underrepresented as news sources, while political actors and international institutions shape the discourse. However, when human-interest frames are used, migrants become more visible, emphasizing their personal narratives.

Studies reveal polarized migration framing in Spanish and Moroccan media. Spanish outlets alternate between humanizing migrants as "travelers" or demonizing them as "threats," often mirroring political agendas like VOX's campaigns (Montagut et al. 28). EU-wide research shows similar contradictions, vacillating between humanitarian and security frames (Moore et al. 89). Moroccan media similarly oscillates between vulnerability and criminality narratives, reflecting the country's dual role as transit hub and destination (El Yousfi and El Allame 50).

According to Brader, the way immigration is portrayed in the media shapes emotional responses such as fear and sympathy, which subsequently influence political attitudes and policy preferences (967). For instance, emphasizing the suffering of migrants can increase sympathy and support for humanitarian measures, whilst drawing attention to security risks can encourage requests for more stringent border controls.

Theoretical Framework

Framing Theory

Framing theory in media studies examines how information is selectively presented to highlight some aspects of events while downplaying others (Entman 7). This process influences public perception, constructing narratives aligned with particular viewpoints or solutions (Hallahan 2). Through techniques such as repetition, metaphor, and selective language, framing shapes audience interpretations of complex issues (Entman 7). It is rarely neutral, being shaped by economic, cultural, and political factors that influence media priorities (Klein and Amis 1325).

In conflict settings, the media often simplify complexity into binary oppositions, reinforcing identities and attracting audience attention (Weaver 144). Framing also plays a key role in

coverage of societal issues such as migration, where emotionally charged language, selective imagery, and strategic sourcing influence public opinion (Gjerazi 60). By amplifying certain aspects and minimizing others, media outlets profoundly fashion societal attitudes and policy debates (Boswell et al. 2).

Scholars highlight the significant impact media framing has had on the perception of migration issues, with coverage often varying significantly depending on the political and social contexts in which it is situated (Klein and Amis 1325). Research suggests that media narratives frequently adapt to align with shifting political realities. For example, in their study of Saudi-Iranian relations, Badad and El-Nawawy observe a dramatic reframing of narratives following the normalization of diplomatic ties between the two countries (16). This finding underscores the broader tendency for media narratives to evolve in response to changing political landscapes, illustrating how framing strategies are often determined by external political developments.

Methodology

Qualitative Textual Analysis

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to examine how *El País* and *Hespress* framed Moroccan irregular migration during two key moments: the 2021 Ceuta border crisis (17–26 May) and the 2023 migration wave (1–10 February). This method involves close, contextual reading of media texts to identify recurring patterns in language, imagery, and narrative structure—elements that reveal the framing strategies used by each outlet (Tesch, 4).

Rather than seeking a single "correct" interpretation, textual analysis explores a range of plausible meanings**,** uncovering the cultural, ideological, and political assumptions embedded in the media discourse (Altheide 288). It situates these interpretations within their historical and socio-political contexts, explaining how certain frames become naturalized as "common sense" among audiences (Kuckartz 62). This interpretive flexibility enables a nuanced understanding of how media narratives resonate with public sentiment and influence broader policy discourse (Altheide 291).

To conduct this analysis, the study uses archival research to gather news articles from the two selected periods. For each outlet, 20 articles were sampled from the pre-recognition phase and 20 from the post-recognition phase, resulting in a corpus of 80 articles. The selection was based on relevance to the migration events, focusing on news reports, editorials, and opinion pieces.

An inductive, interpretive approach was employed to identify dominant frames. One researcher conducted close readings of each article, paying attention to patterns in diction, thematic emphasis, and narrative progression. Frames were not drawn from a predefined coding scheme but instead emerged from the data, evaluated based on their frequency, contextual salience, and ability to reflect shifts in media discourse.

Results

Hespress

Migration Crisis

In its coverage of the 2021 Ceuta migration surge, *Hespress* employs two main frames: "Humanitarian Crisis and Abandonment," which highlights migrant suffering and Morocco's

sense of betrayal by Spain, and "Colonial Mindset and Political Extortion," which presents Spain's actions as colonial and Morocco's response as justified political pressure.

Humanitarian Crisis and Abandonment

This frame portrays Moroccan migrants as vulnerable individuals neglected by both Moroccan and Spanish authorities, emphasizing the socio-economic struggles that drive them to migrate. Articles emphasize how migrants, including minors and families, face dangerous conditions while attempting to reach Ceuta. In "Lack of Spanish Security Encourages Thousands to Swim to Ceuta," it reports that "the weak Spanish security coverage significantly contributed to the massive influx," describing migrants struggling against the sea. Another article, "Five Thousand Migrants Arrive in Ceuta by Swimming," notes that although no fatalities were recorded, migrants were rescued by the Red Cross and police, emphasizing the lack of timely humanitarian intervention.

Hespress employs terms like "abandoned," "neglected," and "vulnerable" to characterize the migrants' condition. References to "families and children" reinforce the humanitarian dimension, while the contrast between rescue efforts and the "absence of proactive measures" highlights governmental neglect. Testimonies from young migrants expressing "hopelessness," "desperation," and "lack of future prospects" position migration as an act of survival rather than defiance. *Hespress* builds a narrative of youth risking their lives due to structural poverty and rigid Spanish security measures. An emotional story, "A Moroccan Father Attempts to Cross to Ceuta to Secure His Disabled Son's Future" (Chamekh), quotes the father saying, "I just want to save my son. I want him to get an education and a better life. Morocco rejected my son, and I am willing to die so that he can live," personalizing the humanitarian crisis.

Colonial Mindset and Political Extortion

Hespress further develops the narrative of Spain as a lingering colonial force by portraying its policies toward Morocco as rooted in historical betrayal and thinly veiled hostility. In its coverage of the Ceuta migration crisis, *Hespress* stresses that Spanish officials, rather than addressing shared responsibility, escalate tensions through "militarized rhetoric" and veiled threats, casting Morocco as the destabilizer. This is reinforced by accusations of a "three-card trick" allegedly employed by Prime Minister Sánchez to maintain Spanish political leverage while masking contradictions in foreign policy. The articles denounce Spain for presenting itself as Morocco's partner while supporting actors hostile to Moroccan territorial integrity, framing Madrid as a duplicitous power operating under colonial logic.

Additionally, *Hespress* alleges that Spain manipulates its influence in the EU to restrict Moroccan exports and block key agreements, effectively acting as an "economic gatekeeper for Europe." This implies a deliberate effort to maintain economic dominance in a post-colonial context. The outlet depicts Spain's hostility as systemic, embedded in a political and media climate that demonizes Moroccan agency while deflecting attention from Spanish complicity. Overall, *Hespress* frames Spain's actions as a mix of economic blackmail and diplomatic sabotage, using terms like "economic obstruction" and "strategic exploitation" to argue that Spain intentionally curtails Moroccan autonomy and development.

Post-Recognition

In the second phase, following Spain's shift on the Sahara, *Hespress* introduces two new frames: "Partnership and Cooperation," portraying a renewed diplomatic alliance, and

"Development-Driven Migration," emphasizing joint economic projects as a solution to irregular migration. These frames reflect a more optimistic and strategic ton.

Partnership and Cooperation

The Strategic Partnership and Security Cooperation frame highlights the strengthened diplomatic and security collaboration between Morocco and Spain, portraying both as allies managing migration and ensuring regional stability. The coverage has shifted from confrontation to coordination and shared goals. One article, "Spain and Morocco Enhance Border Security Cooperation" (Knine), states that "Moroccan security forces, in coordination with their Spanish counterparts, have successfully dismantled multiple human smuggling networks," reflecting the "deepening strategic partnership" between Rabat and Madrid. This marks a shift from viewing border control as Morocco's sole burden.

Another piece, "Spain Allocates Four-Wheel Drive Vehicles to Support Morocco in Combating Irregular Migration" (Chamekh), notes that "through intelligence-sharing and coordinated patrols, both nations have significantly reduced illegal border crossings" and that "Spain has recognized Morocco's key role in stabilizing migration routes and pledged additional support." This suggests a partnership in which Spain acknowledges Morocco's efforts rather than issuing unilateral expectations.

Hespress uses terms like "strategic partnership," "bilateral cooperation," and "joint efforts" to portray the two countries as equals. Phrases like "successful dismantling of smuggling networks" and "coordinated patrols" frame their actions as effective and mutually beneficial. Citing Spanish officials praising Morocco's role reinforces the image of Morocco as a responsible partner. The phrase "Spain has recognized Morocco's key role" signals a narrative shift from pressure to recognition. Additionally, terms such as "intelligence-sharing," "stability," and "regional security" position border control within a broader geopolitical framework, reflecting a move toward framing migration governance as a shared and cooperative effort.

Development-Driven Migration

This frame highlights the economic benefits of migration agreements between Morocco and Spain, focusing on legal migration channels, employment opportunities, and development programs. Rather than framing migration solely as a crisis, the discourse has shifted toward viewing it as an opportunity that, when managed properly, can benefit both countries.

Hespress, in "Spain Expands Legal Work Opportunities for Moroccan Migrants" (Lakhdar), states that "as part of a new bilateral agreement, Spain has pledged to increase the number of legal work visas for Moroccan workers in sectors such as agriculture and construction." A Moroccan labor official adds, "This initiative will provide legal and safe pathways for Moroccan workers while addressing labor shortages in Spain" (Lakhdar). This framing differs with earlier narratives that depicted migration as illicit, instead portraying it as a structured process meeting economic needs.

Another article, "EU Funds Support Moroccan Border Development Programs" (Raji), explains that "European financial aid will help improve infrastructure in Moroccan border regions, creating economic alternatives to irregular migration." This positions migration governance as part of a broader economic development strategy, not just a security concern.

Hespress uses terms like "legal and safe pathways" and "bilateral agreement" to stress the benefits of structured migration. The contrast between "legal work visas" and "irregular migration" reinforces the idea of cooperation. Economic terms like "financial aid," "infrastructure development," and "employment opportunities" shift the focus from border control to economic partnership. The mention of "EU support" underscores Europe's

recognition of Morocco's role. Finally, the shift from crisis language to "economic alternatives" signals an intentional reframing. Phrases like "reducing migration pressures" replace "crackdown" rhetoric, and sources now include labor officials and economic experts, reflecting a broader, development-centered framing.

El País

Migration Crisis

In its 2021 coverage, *El País* framed the Ceuta migration surge through two key lenses: "Instrumentalized Humanitarianism," highlighting the human suffering while pointing to Morocco's political motives, and "EU Security and Spain's Sovereignty," portraying the crisis as a direct challenge to national and European territorial integrity.

Instrumentalized Humanitarianism

El País framed the Ceuta migration crisis using a dual approach that combined humanitarian storytelling with geopolitical implications. Emotionally charged language and vivid imagery depict the scale of the crisis as overwhelming and desperate. Articles such as "5,000 people swim to Ceuta amid escalating diplomatic tensions with Morocco" and "The Minors that Morocco Pushed to the Sea" describe the perilous journeys of migrants, particularly children. Phrases like "mass arrival" and "desperate crossing" reinforce the sense of urgency (Varo & Martín).

Visual narratives play a key role in this framing. Photo essays including "The Migration Crisis in Ceuta, in Images" and "Life on Both Sides of the Ceuta Border, in Images" feature photographs of exhausted migrants, torn families, and security forces managing the influx (El País). One article, "The Civil Guard Who Rescued a Baby at Sea" (Ortega Dolz), focuses on the rescue of an unresponsive infant, whose image becomes emblematic of the humanitarian dimension. Personal stories such as "Abdu: The Story of the Young Man with the Hug on the Beach of Ceuta" (Estaire) humanize the migrants. *El País* uses this frame to critique the lack of coordination between Spain and Morocco and to emphasize the moral dimensions of the crisis.

Simultaneously, *El País* frames the crisis as a product of political manipulation by Morocco. The outlet suggests that the increase in migrant crossings was not coincidental but a calculated response to Spain's hosting of Polisario Front leader Brahim Gali. In "Brahim Gali: The Saharawi Leader Hospitalized in Logroño" (Gálvez and López-Fonseca), *El País* links Morocco's actions directly to diplomatic tensions. For instance, *El País* clearly states that hosting the Sahrawi leader was "the trigger for the conflict with Morocco on the border with Ceuta." Articles such as "The Moroccan Ambassador" point out that "if Gali leaves Spain with opacity, the diplomatic conflict will worsen" (EFE). Other articles like "Morocco Recalls Its Ambassador to Spain for Consultations" (Agencias) present Morocco as using migration as a tool of pressure. Phrases such as "blackmail," "diplomatic crisis," and "worsening of relations" reinforce this narrative.

References to the 2002 Parsley Island incident underscored a longer history of tension and brinkmanship between the two countries. Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita was portrayed as a skilled diplomatic operator, described as "the firm hand of diplomacy in Morocco," suggesting a deliberate effort to exploit Spain's border vulnerabilities. Articles like "Morocco Tries to Disassociate the European Union from the Crisis with Spain" (Peregil) framed Morocco's approach as an attempt to isolate Spain. The outlet quoted the Moroccan FM, who stated, "It has nothing to do with Europe." *El País* observed that the head of Moroccan diplomacy did not, at any point, refer to the Spanish city as the "occupied enclave of Ceuta," a

phrase commonly used in most Moroccan media outlets. This combined narrative of migrants as victims and Morocco as an instigator presented the crisis as both a humanitarian emergency and a geopolitical maneuver. *El País* even quoted *Le Monde*, which stated that Morocco "has not hesitated to use the migratory weapon to put pressure on Europe," reinforcing the idea that migration was being instrumentalized as a tool of political leverage.

EU Security and Spain's Sovereignty

The second major frame focuses on the implications of the migration crisis for Spain's security and European borders. *El País* portrays Ceuta as a vulnerable frontier with geopolitical significance. "Ceuta, the Border City Disconnected from Europe" (Varo and Ruiz) and "Fnideq, the poor mirror where morocco looks towards Ceuta" (Peregil) highlight the enclave's precarious position. They frame it as a contested space caught in the shifting dynamics of international relations, positioning the crisis as a challenge to Spain's territorial sovereignty rather than a humanitarian issue. The symbolic weight of Ceuta, as both a Spanish and European entry point, is stressed throughout the coverage, underscoring its unique legal and geographical status within the Schengen zone.

Articles such as "Sánchez Travels to Ceuta and Aims to Ensure Integrity" (Cué) and "Police Patrol the Streets of Ceuta to Expel Dozens of Immigrants After an Agreement with Rabat" (Varo and Martín) depict the response of Spanish authorities as both decisive and defensive. The coverage focuses on the Spanish government's efforts to regain control of the situation, stressing the urgency of the response in light of the perceived external threat posed by Morocco. These actions are framed as necessary steps to safeguard Spain's territorial integrity and to respond to what is implicitly constructed as an encroachment on national and supranational sovereignty.

The reports invoke strong rhetoric, framing the situation in terms of defense. Words such as "reinforced borders" and "forceful response" are common (Varo and Martín; Cué). This contributes to a discourse that prioritizes border control and the protection of state sovereignty. In one article, *El País* cites police sources reporting that "every two hours, Moroccan forces open the border crossing gate and allow between 40 and 50 people to enter." Such language downplays the humanitarian aspects of the crisis, focusing instead on the immediate threat to Spain's security. The portrayal suggests that the state's primary responsibility is to ensure its own stability, sometimes at the expense of migrants' needs and rights. In another article, Morocco's Foreign Minister is quoted saying that "his country has no obligation to protect the borders of the European Union and that it is not the gendarme of Europe" (Peregil).

El País positions the crisis within a broader European security context. "Spain Approves Giving 30 Million Euros to Morocco to Stop Illegal Immigration" (Martín) suggests Spain's actions are not solely about protecting its own borders, but also about serving as a gatekeeper for the European Union. This reinforces the idea that the migration crisis has continental ramifications, with Spain playing a key role in controlling the flow of migrants into Europe. Expressions such as "to curb irregular immigration" and "to control the Atlantic route" underscore Spain's leadership in managing migratory flows. The coverage implicitly aligns Spain's national security with the EU's collective interest, portraying migration management as both a domestic responsibility and a European mandate.

Post-Recognition

Following Spain's recognition of Morocco's autonomy plan for the Sahara, *El País* introduces two new dominant frames: the Strategic Partnership and Stability frame, which underlines improved bilateral relations and diplomatic coordination between Spain and Morocco, and the

Managed Migration frame, which pins down structured cooperation in border control and the shared management of migration flows as a sign of restored mutual trust.

Strategic Partnership and Stability

Following Spain's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty, *El País* begins to frame migration as an issue managed through diplomatic cooperation, emphasizing stability in Spanish-Moroccan relations. This frame stresses the consolidation of Spain–Morocco relations, portraying Morocco as a reliable partner. The newspaper underscores the mutual benefits of this partnership, suggesting that collaboration is key to addressing shared challenges.

A key example of this frame is the coverage of customs agreements between Spain and Morocco. The article titled "Spain and Morocco Agree to Continue with Preparations to Open the Customs of Ceuta and Melilla but without Setting a Date" (González and Sanz) reflects how *El País* presents bilateral cooperation as an ongoing process rather than a point of contention. By focusing on commitment over delays, *El País* reinforces the perception of the stability of the partnership. This approach shows the importance of patience and persistence in diplomatic efforts.

Economic collaboration is presented as a stabilizing factor benefiting both nations. In the article "Spanish Companies Are Fighting to Participate in a 45,000 Million Moroccan Investment Plan" (Sanz and González), *El País* frames Morocco not as a country from which migrants flee but as an emerging economic hub that attracts Spanish businesses. This framing helps shift the migration narrative away from security threats and toward economic opportunity, suggesting that improved economic ties can contribute to long-term migration management. The newspaper subtly promotes the idea that economic growth can mitigate migration pressures.

Moreover, video analysis such as "Where Does the Relationship Between Spain and Morocco Stand?" (Doherty Luduvice) draws on diplomatic achievements rather than past tensions. This reporting style minimizes discussions on border crises and instead highlights diplomatic efforts, reinforcing the perception that migration is no longer a divisive issue but rather an area of cooperation. By focusing on progress, *El País* fosters a sense of optimism about the future of relations between Spain and Morocco.

Through this frame, *El País* aligns its coverage with the Spanish government's foreign policy objectives. By downplaying friction and emphasizing stability, the newspaper contributes to a broader discourse in which Morocco is seen as a partner rather than a pressure point for migration-related conflicts. This narrative reinforces the idea that diplomacy and collaboration are the most effective tools for managing migration.

Managed Migration

El País also presents migration as a manageable phenomenon rather than a crisis. The Managed Migration frame portrays border control, diplomatic coordination, and economic investment as effective tools for regulating migration flows. This approach reassures readers that migration is a governable process rather than a destabilizing force.

This frame is evident in the newspaper's coverage of migrant settlements within Spain. In articles like "The Inhabitants of Migrant Settlements in Níjar: Every Day We Suffer More Than the Previous One" (Sánchez), the focus shifts from migrants as security threats to migrants as individuals navigating a controlled system. The reporting recognizes migrant hardship but avoids framing it as evidence of policy breakdown, instead presenting it as part of a controllable administrative reality. This perspective humanizes migrants while emphasizing the functionality of state mechanisms.

Furthermore, when discussing border agreements, *El País* avoids alarmist narratives. The article "Spain and Morocco Agree to Continue with Preparations to Open the Customs of Ceuta and Melilla but without Setting a Date" (González and Sanz) presents migration governance as a technical rather than political issue. The newspaper stresses the diplomatic mechanisms in place to regulate migration, emphasizing continuity and coordination over disruption. Such framing advances the notion that effective policy—not reactive enforcement—is the foundation of successful migration governance**.**

Despite diplomatic tensions, *El País* highlights signs of reconciliation between Spain and Morocco. In "Mohamed VI Calls Pedro Sánchez Instead of Receiving Him in Rabat," the phone call is portrayed as a sign of lingering strain. However, a statement from the Moroccan royal cabinet expresses optimism, noting that King Mohammed VI "has welcomed the concerted evolution, trust, and mutual respect of the new phase of bilateral association." The statement further emphasizes that "bilateral relations will be intensely strengthened through concrete actions marked by effectiveness and tangible projects in strategic fields of common interest," suggesting a pivot toward cooperation, particularly in migration and economic matters (González et al.).

Overall, the Managed Migration frame in *El País* aims to instill confidence in the efficacy of diplomatic and administrative approaches to migration. It highlights a combination of bilateral agreements, economic incentives, and coordinated governance. This framing reflects Spain's post-recognition diplomatic strategy and reframes migration challenges as logistical and solvable, rather than chaotic or existential. By emphasizing structured cooperation and institutional control, the newspaper projects confidence in Spain's capacity to manage migration responsibly and proactively.

Discussion

Ceuta Migration Crisis

Both *Hespress* and *El País* covered the 2021 Ceuta migration crisis but framed it in contrasting ways, shaped by their respective national contexts. *Hespress* shows Morocco's victimhood, accusing Spain of hypocrisy and exploitation, aligning with media theories on national identity and framing (Baden 6). It relies mainly on Moroccan analysts, rarely including Spanish or EU voices—except when those sources reinforce Morocco's position. For example, when quoting Spanish claims that Morocco withdrew border enforcement, *Hespress* frames it as an external accusation, reflecting Gjerazi's concept of objectivity through attribution (61).

The outlet also employs emotional language and personal stories, portraying migrants as "abandoned" and "vulnerable," thereby amplifying humanitarian concerns in line with Nikunen's view of affective journalism (323). A headline from *Hespress* reads: "Morocco rejected my son, and I am willing to die so that he can live," capturing the desperation of a father trying to cross for his disabled child (Chamekh). Additionally, *Hespress* invokes colonial discourse, using terms such as "Spanish arrogance" and "neocolonial ambitions" to depict Spain as an imperial force. For instance, one article denounces Spain's actions as part of a "three-card trick" strategy to "undermine Moroccan sovereignty while pretending to cooperate." The crisis is framed not only as a humanitarian emergency but also as political retaliation for Spain's actions, including its hosting of Polisario leader Brahim Ghali.

In contrast, *El País*'s coverage of the crisis also focuses on humanitarian aspects but simultaneously frames the migration event as part of Morocco's geopolitical strategy. The Spanish outlet draws on official sources from both Spain and Morocco, along with international organizations, to highlight the political dimensions of the crisis. It suggests that Morocco has

"weaponized" migration to exert diplomatic pressure on Spain, particularly regarding the Sahara dispute. This narrative reflects broader European patterns of interpreting migration through the lens of security and diplomatic leverage (Miholjcic 5–6).

El País uses emotional language and vivid imagery to humanize the migrants, presenting them as victims of a larger political conflict. This framing aligns with the "spectacle of suffering" identified by Chouliaraki, in which media coverage emphasizes personal stories to evoke empathy (1). However, *El País* also frames Morocco's role as that of a coercive actor, downplaying its own migration challenges and portraying the country as strategically manipulating migration flows to gain political leverage. This reflects a Eurocentric perspective that externalizes migration management, overlooking Morocco's own complex migration dynamics (Lahlou 3-5).

Post-Recognition

The post-2023 phase, following Spain's recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Sahara, represents a significant shift in both *Hespress* and *El País*'s framing of migration. This development aligns with Badad and El-Nawawy's research, who argue that media narratives adapt to and align with shifting political realities. It illustrates the changing diplomatic landscape and evolving media coverage in response to new political developments (Voltmer 4).

For *Hespress*, the post-recognition phase signals a dramatic departure from the crisis-driven narrative of 2021. Coverage in 2023 adopts a more cooperative tone, emphasizing Morocco and Spain's shared interests in migration governance. The language used in 2023, including terms like "bilateral cooperation," "joint efforts," and "intelligence-sharing," construct a narrative of partnership rather than conflict. One article notes that "Spain has recognized Morocco's key role in stabilizing migration routes and pledged additional support," signaling a shift in tone from confrontation to mutual respect (Chamkh). This framing aligns with Mazzoleni and Schulz's theory that media adapt to changing political contexts, where shifting alliances influence coverage patterns (249).

Unlike in 2021, when *Hespress* relied heavily on Moroccan sources, the 2023 coverage incorporates a broader range of voices, including Spanish and EU officials, to reinforce the idea of cooperation. This narrative shift positions Morocco as a key player in regional migration governance, framing the country as a proactive partner rather than a passive recipient of European policy. For instance, one article cites a Spanish official stating that "his initiative will provide legal and safe pathways for Moroccan workers while addressing labor shortages in Spain" (Lakhdar). This links migration to economic opportunity and shared interest. The change corresponds to Brüggemann and D'Angelo's findings on how political transformations prompt media shifts toward cooperative and solution-oriented discourses (98). The emphasis on EU support and European financial aid further portrays Morocco as a responsible actor in managing migration, positioning the country as a key partner in addressing the root causes of migration rather than merely restricting movement.

On the other hand, *El País*'s framing shift in 2023 reflects Spain's new diplomatic stance following its recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Sahara. The coverage evolves from portraying migration as a crisis to framing it as a managed, cooperative issue. The shift from crisis framing to "Managed Migration" reflects Spain's emphasis on maintaining stability in relations with Morocco. By focusing on controlled migration flows and economic collaboration, *El País* presents Morocco as a responsible partner in managing migration. This sentiment is echoed in articles such as "Where Does the Relationship Between Spain and Morocco Stand?" by Doherty Luduvice. This approach aligns with Rodríguez-Pérez et al., who argue that Spanish media narratives adapt to government priorities, aligning coverage with diplomatic and policy objectives (164).

In this phase, both outlets move from presenting migration as a geopolitical tool to framing it as part of broader economic and security cooperation. *Hespress* emphasizes Morocco's agency and growing role in regional affairs, while *El País* highlights the economic and strategic benefits of bilateral collaboration. This shift in framing reflects Morocco's increasing importance in managing migration, with both media outlets portraying the country as a proactive player rather than a passive victim of European policies.

Conclusion

Hespress and *El País* diverge significantly in how they frame Morocco's role in irregular migration, particularly in response to shifting diplomatic developments. In its 2021 coverage, *Hespress* presents Morocco as a victim of European exploitation, emphasizing humanitarian suffering and invoking colonial legacies to critique Spain's role in the Ceuta crisis. By contrast, *El País* depicts Morocco as a calculated geopolitical actor, strategically leveraging migration to pressure Spain, especially over the Sahara issue. While *Hespress* relies on emotional appeals and nationalistic discourse, *El País* balances human interest stories with a focus on state sovereignty and EU border security.

Following Spain's 2022 recognition of Morocco's autonomy plan over the Sahara, both outlets undergo a noticeable tonal and strategic shift. *Hespress* repositions Morocco as an equal diplomatic partner, adopting a cooperative and development-oriented approach that emphasizes shared governance of migration. Simultaneously, *El País* reframes migration as a managed process within the context of restored bilateral stability, highlighting Spain's diplomatic pragmatism and economic collaboration with Morocco. Despite their differing editorial stances, both outlets ultimately converge in portraying migration not as a crisis but as a policy issue to be addressed through coordination and strategic partnership.

This comparison demonstrates how media framing responds to political realignments and reinforces national narratives through selective sourcing, emotional tone, and emphasis. The findings underscore the media's power to shape public perception and influence policy debates in geopolitically sensitive regions. For migration and media studies, the case highlights the importance of analyzing frame evolution over time, especially in contexts where media systems reflect divergent national priorities. Future research might explore audience interpretations of these frames and assess the amplifying role of social media in either sustaining or contesting mainstream narratives.

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