**Scroll culture and authoritarian populism: How Turkish and Greek online news aggravate “refugee crisis” tensions**

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**Abstract**

News consumers are more likely to inform themselves through digital news outlets and social media “newsfeeds” than physical newspapers (Ofcom 2022). Guided by our thumbs, we scroll through news outlets’ homepages and down newsfeeds for information (and entertainment) in what Way (2021) calls “scroll culture”. On 27 February 2020, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that he would no longer stop refugees trying to cross into Europe from Türkiye to Greece, ending a 2016 agreement with the EU. In response, the Greek authorities closed their border with a resultant congregation of thousands of refugees. Both Turkish and Greek politicians blamed each other for the crisis, leaning on authoritarian populist discourses prevalent in both countries. Online news outlets on both sides of the border covered the “crisis”. In this article, we compare how the openings of stories from online news sites that are widely shared on social media lean on governmental authoritarian and populist discourses. This comparative analysis reveals how nations on different sides of a “crisis” articulate discourses that inflame tensions externally whilst promoting internal power structures.

**Keywords**

Türkiye, Greece, Evros/ Meriç River “refugee crisis”, online news, authoritarianism, populism, scroll culture, Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies (MCDS)

**Introduction**

Contentious relations between Türkiye and Greece can be traced back centuries to conflicts such as Ottoman Turks conquering Istanbul which was the centre of the Byzantine Empire in 1453 and the 1821 Greek revolution against the Ottoman Empire. Since the 1970s, the Cyprus conflict has been another source of tension, bringing the neighbours to the brink of war in the UN’s longest running conflict zone (Fouskas, 2001; Mallinson, 2005). 2015 saw refugees fleeing war and conflict zones including Syria and arriving on Greek islands via Türkiye. In response, an EU 2016 agreement allowed Türkiye to seal its borders to the EU in exchange for economic aid.[[1]](#footnote-1) A consequence of this has seen Türkiye hosting the world’s largest number of refugees, with 3.6 million Syrians and close to 320,000 Afghan, Iraqi and Iranians (UNHCR, 2022). With an escalation of Türkiye’s conflict with Syria and an expected mobilisation of more refugees, on 27 February 2020, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that Türkiye would no longer stop refugees trying to cross into Europe. This move aimed to pressure the EU into offering more assistance to its refugee and war efforts (Psaropoulos, 2020). Greek authorities closed their border while thousands of refugees congregated, protested and attempted to cross it. Both governments pointed blame at each other. Turkish officials claimed the crisis was due to Greece not allowing migrants through the border while Greek officials construed the situation as an “invasion of illegal immigrants”, orchestrated by Erdoğan’s regime to destroy Greece and put pressure on Europe.

Though politics differ between Greece and Türkiye, there has been a shift in both to authoritarian populism. This shift has coloured government announcements, its actions and media discourse, with most media uncritically supporting government policy. Along with this recent political shift, both nations, like the rest of the world, have experienced a shift from newspaper consumption to news being consumed digitally (Kalogeropoulos, 2019; Newman, 2021). We no longer depend on daily newspapers or scheduled television and radio bulletins to become informed. Instead, many of us turn to digital news outlets and social media “newsfeeds” with stories shared over and over again (Ofcom, 2022). Whether on news sites or social media platforms, we are guided by our thumbs, scrolling down our feeds for information (and entertainment) in what Way (2021) calls “scroll culture”. We interact with a barrage of headlines, images, introductory sentences and captions, some worth clicking on and some not. Whether we stop to pause, click or scroll on, digital media users engage most with news story “openings”. In this paper, we compare how online news story openings on news outlets’ home pages in both countries inflame division and nationalism by leaning on government authoritarian populist discourses.

**Populism and Authoritarianism in Türkiye and Greece**

Populism represents “popular interests and values” (Williams, 1988, p. 238) with a universal “appeal to the people and anti-elitism” (Laclau, 2005, p. 7). It is a way of representing popular elements opposed to the ideology of the dominant bloc, firmly “separating the ‘people’ from power” (Laclau, 2005, p. 224). “The elite” and “the people” are signifiers that acquire meaning through a diversity of discourses and contexts (De Cleen & Carpentier, 2010; Laclau, 2005, p. 74). Their meanings change and are fought for by different groups such as supporters and opponents of extreme right wing Belgian political groups (De Cleen & Carpentier, 2010), Greek politicians (Serafis et al., 2022), Turkish politicians and protesters (Way, 2018), and supporters and opponents of Trump (Merrin, 2019).

Populism “can adapt flexibly to a variety of substantive ideological values and principles” (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 3) including ethno-nationalism, arguments about immigration and/ or a return to past glories (Demata, 2017). Politicians who combine populism with authoritarianism are a danger since their ideas go against the grain of democratic ideals by prioritising “security against risks of instability and disorder”, “group conformity to preserve conventional traditions” and “loyal obedience toward strong leaders who protect the group and its customs” (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 7). Authoritarian populism leans on a “politics of fear” where a search for collective security pits “our people” against “them”. Such politicians argue that in order to defend “us” we need to restrict “them” legitimising policies that limit the freedoms of immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, foreigners and “others” (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. I; Wodak & KhosraviNik, 2013, p. xix).

Defined as such, both Erdoğan and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis are authoritarian populists. Despite rising to power in 2002 on a wave of tolerant politics, Erdoğan has become “an authoritarian president whose speeches are as populist as those of the late Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez” (McKernan, 2019). He represents himself as a pious, devote, Turkish Muslim “man of the people”. Those who oppose him and his ruling Justice and Development party (AKP), including Western powers, Kurds, the former secular ruling classes, media, human rights activists and political opponents are named as “traitors”, “conspirators”, and “outsiders”. Scores of activists, opposition politicians and journalists linger in jail, the latter numbering one of the highest in the world (Öğret, 2016) with Türkiye ranked 153rd out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders 2021 World press freedom index. Over 90 percent of media is pro-government and the remaining silenced or stifled (Way & Akan, 2017; Way et al., 2018), with most aspects of civil society firmly under government control and/ or closely monitored.

Mitsotakis’s New Democracy Party (ND) beat the populist left-wing SYRIZA in the 2019 Greek national elections on a (neo-)liberal and “law and order” agenda (Boukala, 2020; Mylonas, 2020). Mitsotakis couples this agenda with far-right populist, anti-communist, and nationalist discourses (Boukala, 2021a). This is notable in both the dispute between Greece and North Macedonia over the name “Macedonia” (Boukala & Serafis, forthcoming) and his anti-migrant agenda (Boukala, 2021b). These have been introduced and openly supported by members of his government.[[2]](#footnote-2) Typical of authoritarian-populists, media freedom has come under fire, Reporters Without Borders (2021) claiming that, “[p]ress freedom suffered in Greece in 2020, [since t]he conservative government led by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis … sought, directly or indirectly, to control the flow of information closely”.

Immigration became a prominent issue in Erdoğan’s and Mitsotakis’s agendas during the so-called “refugee crisis”. This is in line with other authoritarian, right-wing populist leaders and parties (Lorenzetti, 2020) who capitalise on migration (among other issues) to back up a politics of fear (Wodak, 2021; Krzyżanowski et al., 2018). In fact, recent studies testify that this discourse effectively permeates several mediascape(s) (Krzyżanowski, 2018; Hameleers, 2019), fuelling discrimination and justifying exclusion of the immigrant “other” from host societies (Serafis et al., 2020, 2021), whilst making populist perspectives more powerful in the public sphere (Mazzoleni, 2008). In a recent study on the framing of the crisis in mainstream Greek media, Kostopoulos and Mylonas (2022) claim that “the ND government used the events to galvanize its constituents by presenting a ‘tough stance’ on migration” while “[t]he mainstream media’s role [was] propagandistic, allowing the conservative and neoliberal Greek government to effectively contain critique, protest, opposition, and solidarity”. However, a comparative analysis of Greek and Turkish discourses on the crisis is missing. It is here, we aim to investigate online news discourses both in Türkiye and Greece with a view to unravelling how and to what extend Erdoğan’s and Mitsotakis’s authoritarian populist perspectives penetrate online news portals’ discourses.

**Sample selection**

We analyse online news story openings from Türkiye’s and Greece’s two highest circulation daily news outlets which are *Sabah* and *Sözcü* in Türkiye (Dalkiran, 2020) and *Ta Nea* and *Kathimerini* in Greece (Kalogeropoulos, 2019)*.*

*Sabah,* established in 1985, is a pro-AKP tabloid-style newspaper. Direct government links were first forged in 2007 when it was sold to Çalık Holding, its CEO Erdoğan’s son-in-law (Hürriyet, 2013). In 2013, it was sold to Zirve Holding owned by the Kalyon Group (BBC, 2013) whose founder (Hasan Kalyoncu) is a personal friend of Erdoğan and contributed to the establishment of AKP (Biyografi, 2008; Demirkaya, 2013). *Sözcü* is an anti-AKP tabloid-style newspaper. It is a supporter of Kemalism which sees Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding father of the Republic of Türkiye, as its symbolic leader, a champion of secularism, modernisation and closeness with Europe (Mango, 1999). *Sözcü* is a place where journalists who experience AKP oppression and censorship generally gravitate towards (Çetingüleç, 2014). Despite constant governmental pressure, “*Sözcü* is still seen as an independent outlet, critical of the government, albeit in a difficult political environment”, resulting in very subtle forms of opposition (Newman, 2021; Way, et al., 2018). In Greece, *Ta Nea* and *Kathimerini* were established in 1934 and 1919 respectively and are among Greece’s oldest and most read newspapers (Psychogios, 2004). The latter is a prestigious conservative broadsheet which traditionally favours the New Democracy party (Kostopoulos, 2020, p. 21). The former used to have a centre-left orientation, but changed in 2015 towards a more centrist and centre-right/ pro-New Democracy position with a change in ownership (Rat, 2019).

Though we could have examined any number of issues or events, here we examine coverage of the 2020 Evros/ Meriç River “refugee crisis”. We chose this because it is a recent shared event that saw both nations and their media take different “sides”. Furthermore, it was widely reported in both countries, as well as internationally due to its international implications, especially with the EU. To obtain our sample, we typed “Evros/ Meriç River” and “Refugees” (“meriç nehri mülteci” in Turkish and “Έβρος πρόσφυγες” in Greek) into the four outlets’ search engines. Our sample dates are 28 February to 7 March 2020, the week beginning with Erdoğan declaring the border was open and then the subsequent border “crisis”. This search produced 63 stories from *Sabah*, 38 from *Sözcü,* 17 from *Ta Nea* and 40 from *Kathimerini.* After discarding duplicate articles and stories that focus on other aspects of refugees or international/ EU politics, the search produced our sample of seven stories each from *Sabah* and *Sözcü* and ten each from *Ta Nea* and *Kathimerini*.

We analyse news story “openings”, that is what digital media users first experience when they either search on news outlets’ webpage or come across in their social media feeds. We chose openings over whole stories to reflect trends in online reading patterns which indicate readers spend 30 seconds per day on average looking at online news (Ponsford, 2017). “Typical” readers rarely go beyond the homepage and read whole articles, instead “the only thing they really ever see are headlines and a few words of introduction at best” (Smith, 2021). Each news story in our sample opens with a headline and an accompanying image. Some openings also include an image caption whilst others an opening sentence or two. The distinction between what we name the opening of the story and the main body is obvious through the use of different colours, font and/ or layout. Headlines and captions appear in Turkish and Greek, and were translated by the two bilingual authors. The translations were subject to analysis. Though translations are best avoided in discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995, p. 190), many seminal works use them (Fairclough, 2008; Flowerdew & Leong, 2007; van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999) and we believe our translations fairly represent the originals.

**Approach**

We draw on Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies (MCDS) which finds its origins in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Halliday’s (1985) systemic functional grammar. These approaches assume linguistic and visual choices reveal broader discourses articulated in texts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021), discourses being models of the world that give a sense of “what view of the world is being communicated through semiotic resources” (Abousnnouga & Machin, 2010, p. 139). Like CDA, MCDS aims to reveal what kinds of social relations of power, inequalities and interests are perpetuated, generated or legitimated in texts both explicitly and implicitly (van Dijk, 1991). Digital media and social media are multimodal, taking advantage of new technological affordances and MCDS is ideal for examining how modes simultaneously play different roles and work together to articulate discourses. In our study, we examine written text and images. Though MCDS demands a close reading of texts, we also examine social, historical and cultural contexts to define the meaning potential of choices made in texts.

Headlines, images, captions and opening sentences are analysed in terms of how they recontextualise discourses articulated by both nation’s politicians and authorities. Recontextualisations involve transforming social practice, actors, events and issues into a representation that “selectively appropriates, relocates, refocuses and relates other discourses to constitute its own order” (Bernstein, 1996, p. 47). These are not neutral, but transform or modify not only the “subject and content of …practice, but also recontextualises the how [affecting] social base, position and power relations” (Bernstein, 1996, p. 53). Following van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999), we consider four types of transformations when analysing recontextualisations: Deletions, rearrangements, substitutions, and additions. We examine what practices, events, actors and actions and aspects of these are deleted and included in news story openings. We also consider how events have been rearranged from their original order of occurring to the order represented in texts, this being related to interests, goals and values of producers (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). How people are named, and activities, social and political concepts represented are “substitutions” and carry with them ideological implications (Krzyżanowski, 2016, p. 309). We consider what is added to a recontextualisation, including reactions, purposes, and legitimations, all of which can be highly ideological (van Leeuwen, 2007, 2008). We argue that in news openings, concepts, practices, actors and actions are recontextualised in ways that exemplify dominant discourses from each nation – ones that perpetuate distrust, hate and othering.

**Data Analysis**

**Turkish news**

Though we see slight differences in stories between *Sözcü* and *Sabah* due to their political perspectives and interests, both lean on Erdoğan’s brand of authoritarian populism that articulates a strong, righteous Turkish nation (or/ and government) that must prioritise security against risks and threats perpetuated by the Greek “other” during the immigrant crisis.

***Immigrant “crisis”***

Both news outlets support the government’s narrative that there is an immigrant crisis. In *Sözcü*, who is responsible for the crisis is de-emphasised while sympathy towards immigrants is emphasised. This position opens up the possibility for readers to consider the role of the Turkish government in the crisis, a subtle form of criticism that is typical of Turkish oppositional media (Way, et al., 2018). A 2 March story opening exemplifies this. The headline “Scenes of children who burst into tears from their immigration journey”, alongside introductory sentences and the caption see “children” used four times. This is an overlexicalisation used for emphasis. They “burst into tears”, “are hungry, tired, exhausted, helpless” and “too young to understand”, all activations, though none with agency and all evoking sympathy. This sympathy is emphasised with childrens’ “journey of hope”, “waiting with hope”, “have lots of hope in their heart”. These additions are difficult to substantiate, though connote more sympathy (van Leeuwen & Wodak 1999). Readers are also told that “immigrants (children with them) ... wait for days in a boat, one fence, one door waiting ... to hear from anyone to say come to my country.” Here the very complex situation of Türkiye making immigration deals with the EU, people fleeing conflicts and poverty and Erdoğan claiming open borders is reduced to children helplessly “waiting” by the Greek-Turkish border. This vast oversimplification omits any mention of these complexities, yet allows readers to feel sympathy for immigrants who were following Erdoğan’s claims of open borders, but repelled by Greek authorities who do not let them in.

This story’s opening image (image one), further articulates a discourse of sympathy without accrediting blame. Three children look at the camera in a demand image, offering viewers a point of identification, a chance to symbolically engage with them and respond to their cry for help (Kress & van Leeuwen 2021). The children look up to the camera, an angle of interaction that connotes a lack of power. The middle child leans into the girl to our left as two children put their hands up to a fire to keep warm. The rocky ground does not suggest a fun family camping day out, but an inhospitable place, as does the darkness.



Image one: Sympathy for refugees

Notably different than *Sözcü, Sabah* emphasises the scale of people coming to the border, emphasising Erdoğan’s narrative of a crisis caused by the Greek “other”. This is seen in a large number of images of migrants walking on roads, in woods and across fields, standing at the border, waiting in cramped, dark camps, sitting on crowded buses, crossing rivers, climbing fences, confronting Greek border patrols and showing injuries reportedly perpetrated by Greek authorities. *Sabah* also articulates discourses of sympathy for refugees, but this is more directly linked to Greek action than seen in *Sözcü*, indicative of its close government ties. A 4 March article with the headline “Greek police separates her from her family! She explains with tears” is one such example. The captions reads “Greek police separates Menice from her family” and “She recounts those moments with tears”. Here, the headline and caption name the Greek authorities impersonally and functionally, emphasised at the beginning of sentences and activated negatively in “separates her/ Menice”. The headline’s exclamation mark emphasises outrage. But lexica and images also articulate sympathy. “Menice” is passivated, a strategy that articulates sympathy. She is named individually and informally (“Menice” and “she”), allowing readers a point of identification and connotations of closeness unlike a formal or impersonal naming. Though “she” is activated in “recounts” and “explains”, this is done “with tears” (twice), again connoting sympathy.

Sympathy is further articulated in the introductory sentences’s use of direct speech which allows for original pronouns to represent emotions first hand in “I miss my family” and “I’d like to find my siblings and my parents”. She claims “Greek police took our phones, money and our belongings. Greek police behaved very badly. They hit everybody”. Here,”Greek police” and “they” are used to name the “others” who “took” belongings, “behaved very badly” and “hit everybody”. All the while, Menice and other migrants are represented as victims, feeding into governmental discourses that Greece is a threat to victimised refugees who want to cross into the EU.

More sympathy is connoted in the accompanying image (image two). Here Menice is shot in an extreme close-up looking up to the camera in a disempowered angle of interaction. Tears in her eyes and a pout on her face emphasises her grief. Her pink coat collar reminds viewers she is a little girl like others while her blue woolly hat indicates a cold hostile environment. The inset photograph shows Menice looking at the camera again, offering a point of identification and symbolic interaction between herself and the viewer. Her surroundings of a few bags on the ground suggests this is how she is living on the road without her family. This all points to a discourse that suggests Erdoğan is correct in opening the border and the Greek “other” is to blame. Both lexica and images echo and unquestionably support Erdoğan’s decisions whilst constructing a threatening Greek “other”, a pillar of authoritarian populism.



Image two: Crisis due to Greece

***Greek “other”***

Despite some differences in articulations of blame, a dominant discourse across both outlets is Greeks are violent “others” who are a threat to immigrants and “us”. The former is seen in the above analysed *Sabah* story and both are notable in a 2 March *Sözcü* story. Its headline is “On the border, Greek soldiers open fire on refugees!” and its first sentence reads “Greece border forces open fire with a barrage of automatic guns on refugees, River Meriç”. In both, “Greek soldiers” begin the dominant phrase. They are functionally and generically named, the latter “symbolically remove[d] from the readers’ world of immediate experience, treated as distant ‘others’” (van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 48). Soldiers are activated with agency connoting great (negative) power as they “open fire...on refugees”, suggesting a lack of control and restraint. Furthermore, the prepositional phrases “with a barrage of automatic guns on refugees” performs two functions. First, “a barrage” suggests a very large quantity that makes the act of opening fire even more severe, as does identifying the type of weapons, “automatic guns”, sounding far more ferocious than “antique hand pistols”. Second, adding “on refugees” passivated by Greek aggression in both excerpts connotes disempowerment and sympathy. Including the Turkish name of the border river, the “River Meriç” as a location marker, situates the incident on Turkey’s border, suggesting such violence is a threat to “us” in Turkey, another pillar of authoritarian populism. Excluded from this and representations throughout the sample is a clear critical account of the political context which led up to these tragic events.

The accompanying image (image three) is what users view in the story opening, it being a freeze frame of a video. Victimisation of refugees by Greek aggression is connoted. Four refugees are seen in a small dinghy on the River Evros/ Meriç. They do not face us, but look to the “other” river bank in a disempowered offer image. Arms on two of the passengers are extended in the air, in a pose that looks like surrender. The person on the far right of the dinghy is crouched down. In the context of lexica that tell readers Greeks are opening fire on refugees on Turkey’s border, an aggressive Greek “other” who attack refugees on “our” border is articulated.

Graphical user interface

Description automatically generated

Image three: Aggression and victimisation

***Strong and correct Turkish nation/ government***

In *Sözcü* we find representations of a strong and correct nation, while in *Sabah*, a strong and correct government, each aligning with their respective political orientations, yet each articulating the authoritarian populist idea that prioritises loyal obedience to “our” strong leader who protects “us”. On 4 March, both reported that a refugee had died near the border. *Sözcü* covered this in ways which typify its Turkish nationalist ideology, an ideology that feeds into Erdoğan’s authoritarian populism. The title “Another death on the Greek border.....Governorship explains the details” emphasises victimhood by placing “Another Death” in a dominant sentence position. Presuppositions are “a taken-for-granted, implicit claim embedded within the explicit meaning of a text or utterance” (Richardson, 2007, p. 63). Here, “another” presupposes that there have been other deaths, thereby articulating a very negative discourse of victimhood on the border. Choosing to name the border “Greek” and not “Turkish Greek” points a metaphorical finger at who is to blame for this and “other” deaths. The second half of the headline legitimates and empowers Turkish authorities though not as much as they could. Here we have the impersonal naming of “governorship” which lacks the connoted closeness of a personal naming (Fairclough, 2003, p. 149), though it is a functional naming, a strategy associated most with those with power (Machin & van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 134; van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 59). Furthermore, the governorship is activated in “Governorship explains...”, a verb that connotes knowledge and power. As such, a strong Turkish nation is empowered, though the government is distant, de-personalised.

Throughout *Sözcü*, we see images of Turkish maps, flags, language and vehicles. In this story opening’s image (image four), we see 10 Turkish soldiers, eight in the foreground walking from our left to right holding fire arms. They are homogenised, functionally identified through their camouflage uniforms, head gear, boots and firearms; a team, strong, prepared, and united. They do not look at us, being busy on a mission, active working as a team. In the background, we see a small building in the colours of the Greek flag, situating them at the Greek-Turkish border. As such, the image connotes the need for Turkish security to protect “us” against outside (Greek) threats and disorder caused by the refugee crisis, another pillar of authoritarian populism.

A group of soldiers running

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Image four: Turkish strength

*Sabah’s* coverage connotes the need for loyal obedience to the government, once again leaning on authoritarian populist discourses. Its headline reads “Flash statement from the Edirne governorship: 1 immigrant killed on the Greek side”. Like *Sözcü*, Turkish authorities are not personally named, but impersonally and functionally as “the Edirne governorship” connoting power, legitimacy but less closeness than a personal naming. Unlike *Sözcü*, the governorship is emphasised being named early in the sentence, reflecting government support. Sympathy for immigrants is articulated and emphasised in a dominant phrasal position in “1 immigrant killed”, while Greek involvement is restricted to “on the Greek side” at the end of the sentence in a de-emphasised prepositional phrase (van Dijk, 1991, p. 216).

Visual representations of governmental figures are key to legitimising government power. The accompanying image to this story includes a personal representation of the government, not seen in *Sözcü*. Here readers see a representative of Edirne’s governorship speaking at a press conference. The caption reads “While the Turkish parliament are examining (immigration) ...... Greece kills one immigrant”. Turkish politicians are named impersonally and functionally in a dominant sentence position and active “examining”, suggesting power while “Greece kills one immigrant”. Here, a whole country “Greece” is activated with agency killing an immigrant.

A similar strategy of governmental strength and power is seen in the opening images throughout the *Sabah* sample. For example, on 5 March, an image of AKP’s deputy chairman and Minister of the Interior Süleyman Soylu accompanies the story opening (image five). This story outlines Soylu’s reaction to the aforementioned death. In the image, Soylu is salient in a close-up shoulder shot. He is in a powerful demand image looking straight at the camera whilst sitting at a desk with a microphone. Suit, tie and shirt suggest formality. The Turkish national police department (Emniyet Müdürlüğü) flag in the background situates him in a functional role, again suggesting security, power and legitimacy. A serious facial expression and leaning forward connotes importance. He is a legitimate politician who demands our loyal support whilst criticising the wrong actions of the “other” nation.

A person in a suit and tie

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Image five: Government legitimacy

**Greek news**

There is no discernible difference in how *Kathimerini* and *Ta Nea* represent the immigration crisis. Both news outlets articulate anti-migrant discourses of the threatening “others” that have to be restricted and excluded to defend “our” way of life. Migrants are represented as being instrumentalised by Erdogan’s regime and have to be prevented from being allowed into Greece by the Greek state-security forces. As such, news outlets are fully compliant with narratives circulating by high-ranking Greek officials and members of the cabinet, underpinning Mitsotakis’s authoritarian populist perspective on the migratory issue, while legitimising border enforcement by security forces to address migrant danger.

***The menacing “other”***

A 29 February *Kathimerini* story emphasises a menacing “other”, with its headline “The authorities are in alarm to prevent an ‘invasion’ of immigrants - Police forces at Evros reinforced”. Here, migrant populations are represented in terms of the well-known metaphor of a refugee “invasion”. Articulating authoritarian populist notions that in order to defend us, we need to restrict them, scholars have noted how lexica in a number of contexts frame “migration as a threat and thus assign a special sense of urgency to the situation, indirectly calling for mobilization on the part of the in-group to defend itself” (Serafis, et al., 2021, p. 570). The inclusion of “in alarm” adds urgency to the “invasion”. In dominant sentence position, “the authorities” are emphasised. Though unclear as to who these are, this impersonal naming carries connotations of power and legitimacy. This naming alongside lexical choices of “in alarm” justifies why “Police forces” are “reinforced” to prevent such an “invasion”. As such, the authoritarian populist anti-migrant perspective of the Greek government is articulated.

The accompanying photograph (image six) represents migrants in ways that again articulate the “other” who are to be repelled. Salient and centred in a larger group of people, are three refugees in a demand image gazing at the camera and symbolically engaging with viewers. All three are represented active, though with very little suggestion of power. All are seen in “emotional processes” of crying (woman in the centre), comforting (woman on the left) and being scared/ angry (man on right). A man on the far right of the image covers his face with a scarf, a stereotypical portrayal of one involved in illegal actions (Hart, 2014, pp. 74-75). All the women in the photograph wear head coverings, culturally categorised as Muslim “others” who are a threat to conventional (Christian) traditions. A background of wire fencing and a large crowd of immigrants adds to the idea of an “invasion”. These choices construct migrants on the border as “different”, the menacing “other”, according to authoritarian populist discourses of the Greek government.

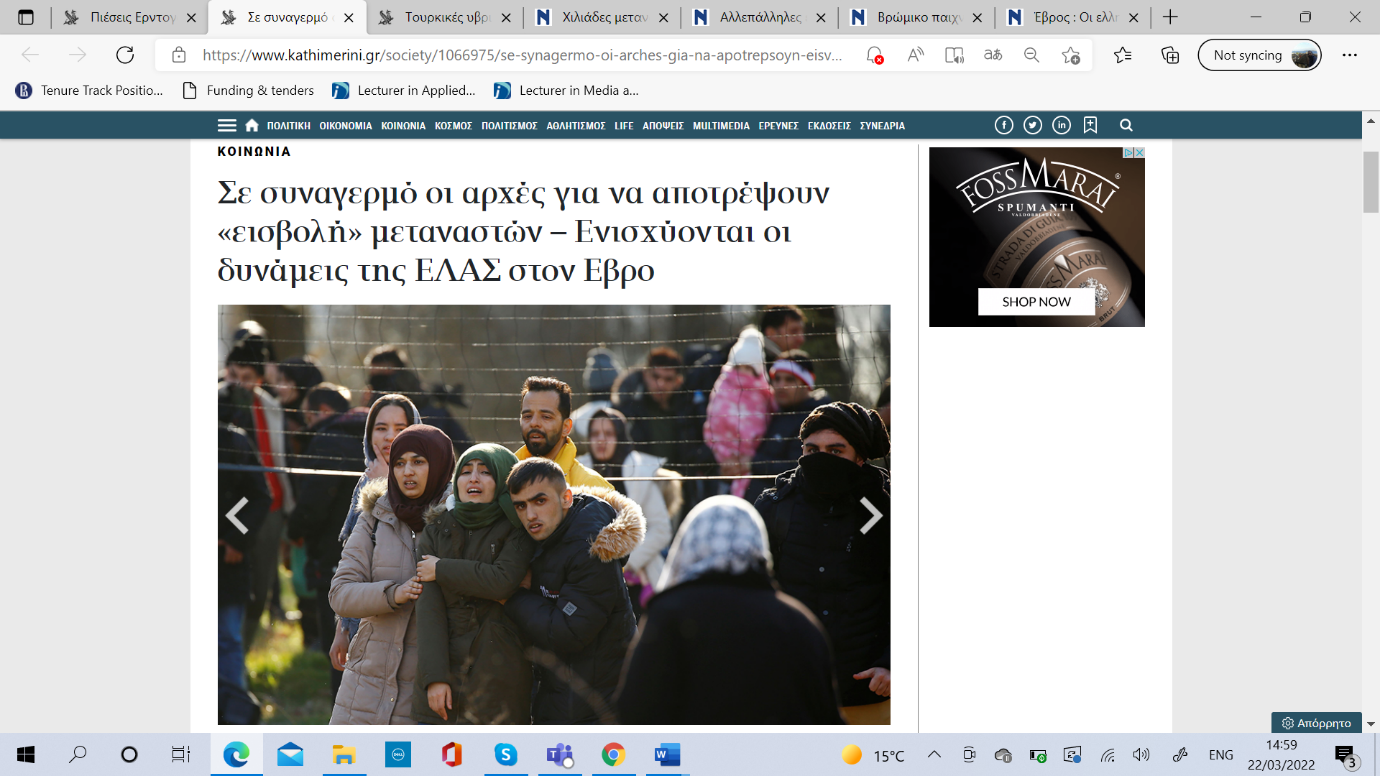


Image six: Menacing “other”

In both news outlet’s coverage there is a discourse of mass migration, leaning on authoritarian populist discourses of a “politics of fear”. This is evident in *Ta Nea*’s 29 February headline “Thousands of immigrants are pushing to pass the Greek borders - reinforcements are being sent to the secutiry forces”. In dominant sentence position we see an impersonal naming alongside a numerative in “Thousands of immigrants”. These choices see immigrants being represented impersonally whilst leaning on the discourse of a large scale invasion (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 38). The danger of immigrant invasion is connoted in the material process of “are pushing to pass the Greek borders”. This combination of an “invasion” and negative actions of “pushing” creates a sense of an emergency, legitimising the necessity for “reinforcements ... being sent to the security forces” to repell the invaders.

In the accompanying photograph (image seven), danger and threat is further articulated. Three immigrants are pictured in a foreground of fire and smoke on the Turkish-Greek border. Two of them are hooded, suggesting illegal activities (Hart, 2014). Two throw projectiles at the Greek security forces who appear in the distant background, while one immigrant looks on. All three have their backs to us, offering no symbolic interaction, engagement or sympathy with viewers (Machin, 2007). As such, immigrants are distant “others” who are active, powerful and a threat to Greece while viewers are more likely to sympathise with Greek security forces who are passivated, victims of their aggression.

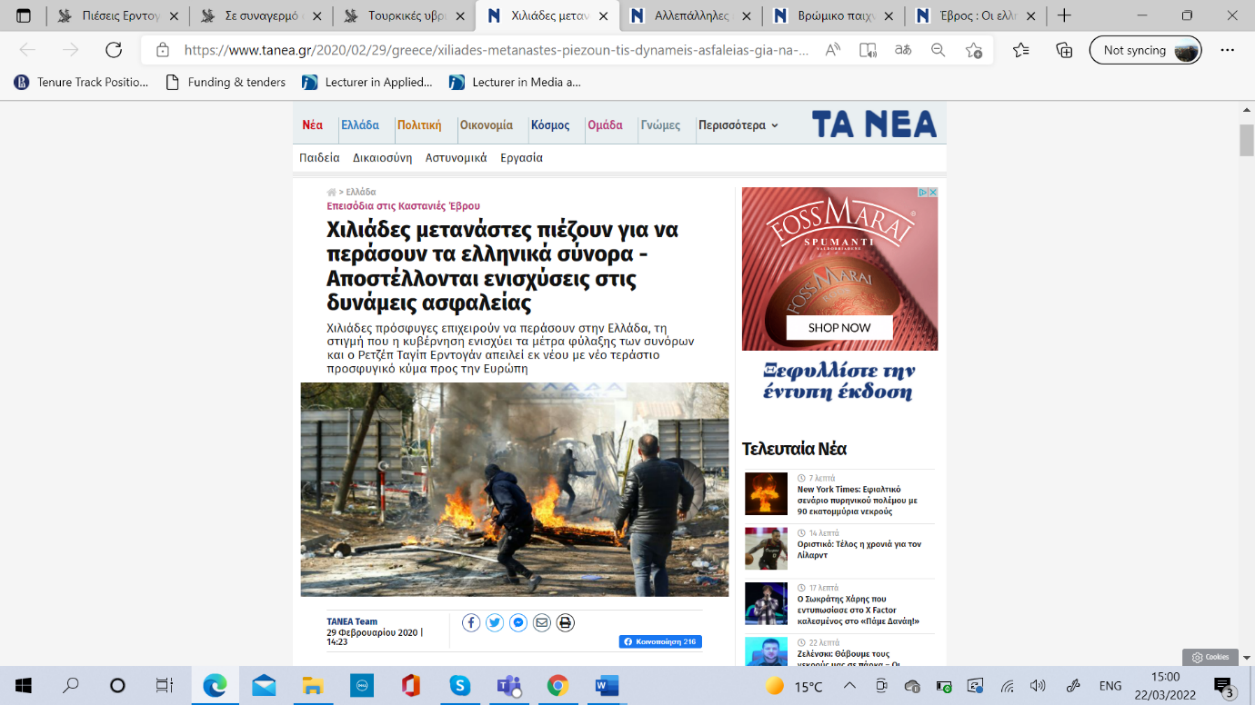


Image seven: Violent refugees

***Erdogan instrumentalises migration***

In some story’s openings Erdoğan's negative actions in the crisis are clearly articulated, again articulating authoritarian populist discourses of fear of “the other”. Such is the case in *Kathimerini’*s 28 February headline “Erdoğan's pressures to Europe through Evros”. Here, the Turkish president is named personally allowing readers a (negative) point of identification. He is activated with agency in “pressures”, connoting great (negative) power, in this context using migration as a weapon to pressurise Europe (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 33). “Europe” is a naming that collectivises all of Europe (including Greece) which is passivated by Erdoğan's pressure, connoting a lack of power but also sympathy for Europe (van Leeuwen, 1995). Though refugees are excluded from the headline, “through Evros” is an “objectivation-spatialization” where social actors are “represented by means of reference to [the] place with which they are, in the given context, closely associated” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 46). This impersonal representation makes it easier to “other” them, treat them as an enemy, a threat (van Leeuwen, 1996). As such, the headline adheres to government discourses of external threats to Greece from Erdoğan and an immigrant “other”.

The accompanying photograph (image eight) sees a long shot of a large crowd of immigrants. We do not see the individualisation of refugees that evoke sympathy as we have seen in the Turkish news. Instead, groups of (mostly) men who are indistinguishable in the distance are depicted standing behind a barrier on the Greek-Turkish border. The barrier constructs a sense of distance between “us” and the perceived “other” (Ledin & Machin, 2020, p. 50) who need to be excluded/ remain behind borders. This discourse echoes the Greek government’s authoritarian populist discourses that prioritise security and restrictions on “them” refugees to defend “us”. The headline works with the image to remind us that this threat is due to Erdoğan who instrumentalises refugees to gain concessions from Europe.



Image eight: Masses of refugees

The threat to Greece extends beyond refugees to include Erdoğan’s Türkiye, a hostile “other”, legitimating the need to prioritise security at the expense of freedoms for immigrants. This is evident in the 4 March *Kathimerini* headline which reads: “Turkish hybrid operations in our borders: The invasion has already begun”. Here we find Türkiye is emphasised at the beginning of the first phrase yet named impersonally in the nominal phrase “Turkish hybrid operations”, thereby omitting closeness and making it easier to “other” Turks (van Leeuwen, 1996). Missing in this phrase is any action, de-emphasising representations of power, though emphasising negativity through being “in our borders”. The second phrase again emphasises negativity, “The invasion” being in a dominant phrasal position. Here presuppositions play a role. Though Türkiye is not named, using the present perfect tense in “has already begun” presupposes that there is an ongoing invasion and the first phrase tells us Türkiye is responsible. Though not directly activated granting Türkiye representations of greater power, this sentence construction connotes an active and explicitly hostile Türkiye which is against Greece. As such, any act of prevention by the Greek authorities is legitimised. In this case, not only refugees need to be repelled, but so do Turkish invading forces, leaning on the government’s authoritarian populist notions of “others” who are a threat to “us” and need to be repelled.

Greek power and legitimising invasion prevention is also emphasised in the accompanying image (image nine). This long shot foregrounds a large number of Greek security forces and a vehicle. The choice of a group shot in the distance and a horizontal angle of interaction that sees the security forces looking away from us does not emphasise closeness and individuality. Instead members of the security forces are homogenised, each wearing dark uniforms, white helmets and standing in lines shoulder to shoulder. These choices all suggest strength in unity of “our” security forces who are preventing invasion. In the background is a border, including a tower draped in large Turkish flags. This representation not only identifies who are the invaders, but represents them in a de-humanised way (again), this time as flags. As such, the image makes it easier for Greek authorities to “other” Turks and treat them as an enemy, legitimising sending security forces to the border.

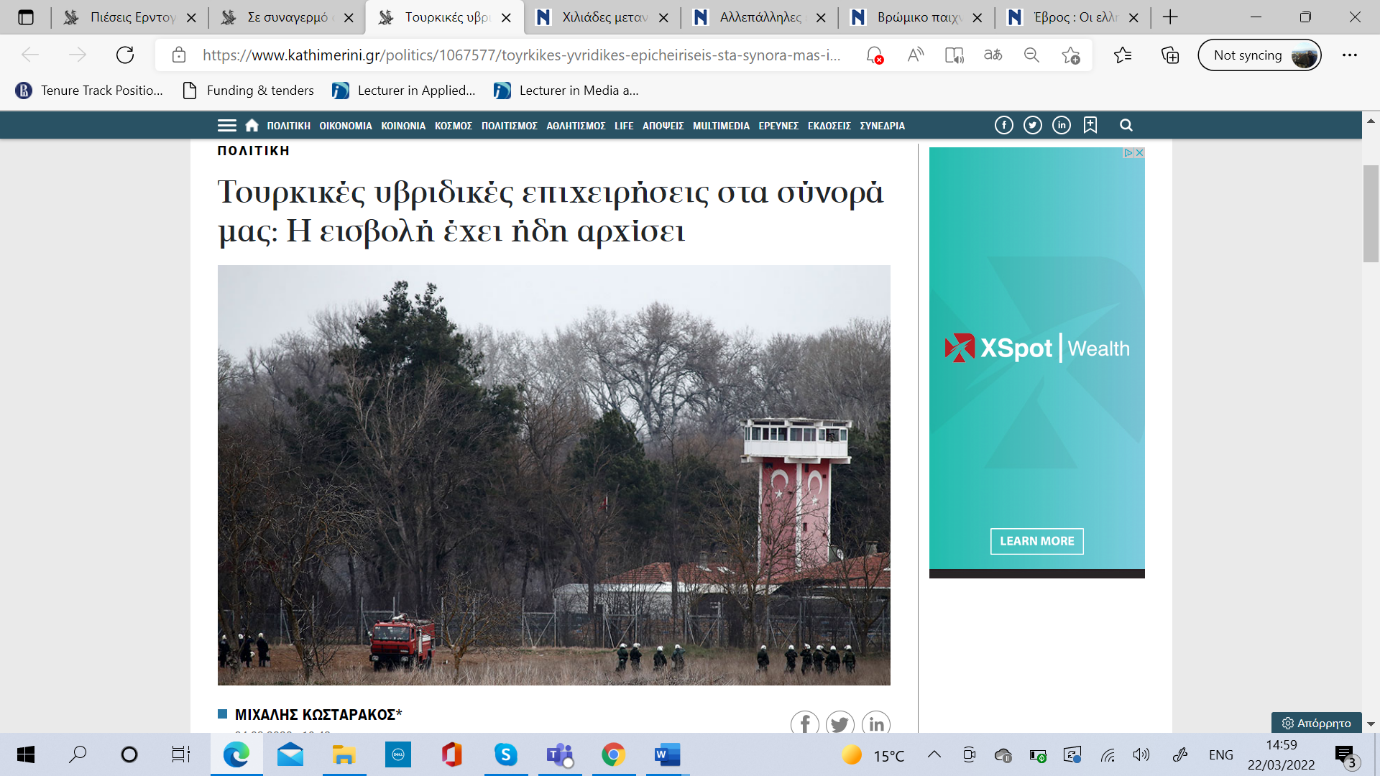


Image nine: Hostile Türkiye

On 2 March, a *Ta Nea* headline announces “The Greek forces are receiving continuous attacks with tear gas - immigrants unveil Erdoğan's political machinations”. Here, “Greek forces” are emphasised at the beginning of the sentence while being at the “receiving” end of agentless “attacks with tear gas”. Though agentless, political context and naming “Erdoğan” later in the headline attributes agency to Turkish border forces. At the same time, “tear gas” used here to identify Turkish forces, is an example of “objectivized-instrumentalized” naming, a de-emphasising and disempowering strategy that identifies a social actor by “the instrument with which they [social actor] carry out the action” (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 46). In the second clause, “immigrants” are represented activated “unveil[ing] Erdoğan’s political machinations”. However, this does not suggest power. Van Leeuwen (1995, p. 99) tells us that abstracted representations of actions “abstract away from more specific ‘micro-actions’ that make up actions”. These are pronounced in texts that legitimise or de-legitimise actions and reactions. Here “unveil” obscures what actions immigrants have done. Furthermore, through the possessive “Erdoğan’s political machinations”, immigrants are represented as pawns in Erdoğan’s manipulations, while Erdoğan is represented negatively. As such, authoritarian populist notions of a “politics of fear” of refugees and Erdoğan who instrumentalises migration and the “refugee crisis” to favour his broader (geo)political aims are articulated.

Similar Turkish deemphasising/ disempowering strategies are used in the opening sentence. Here, agency again is de-emphasised in “Just before 10 o’clock, new riots took place, when tear gas was fired from the Turkish side”. In the dominant phrase, riots are emphasised with the adverb “new” presupposing that there have been other riots provoked by the “Turkish side”, “side” suggesting difference, division and opposition (Way, 2013). We also see agentless tear gas being fired, though collocated with this is “the Turkish side” de-emphasised in a preposional phrase at the end of the sentence. As such, this sentence emphasises danger on the part of powerful immigrants with Turkey being surrounded with negativity, though not as empowered as it could be.

The accompanying photograph (image ten) to this *Ta Nea* story opening bears a striking resemblance to image seven. Unlike image seven, in this photograph, the people throwing projectiles at Greek security forces are indisinguishable due to the image being much darker than image seven. In the context of the headline and the opening sentence, the image articulates a discourse of danger from the “Turkish side”, including both immigrants and possiblyTurkish border forces. As such, Mitsotakis’s authoritarian populism that articulates anti-immigrant and anti-Turkish/ Erdoğan discourses is echoed.

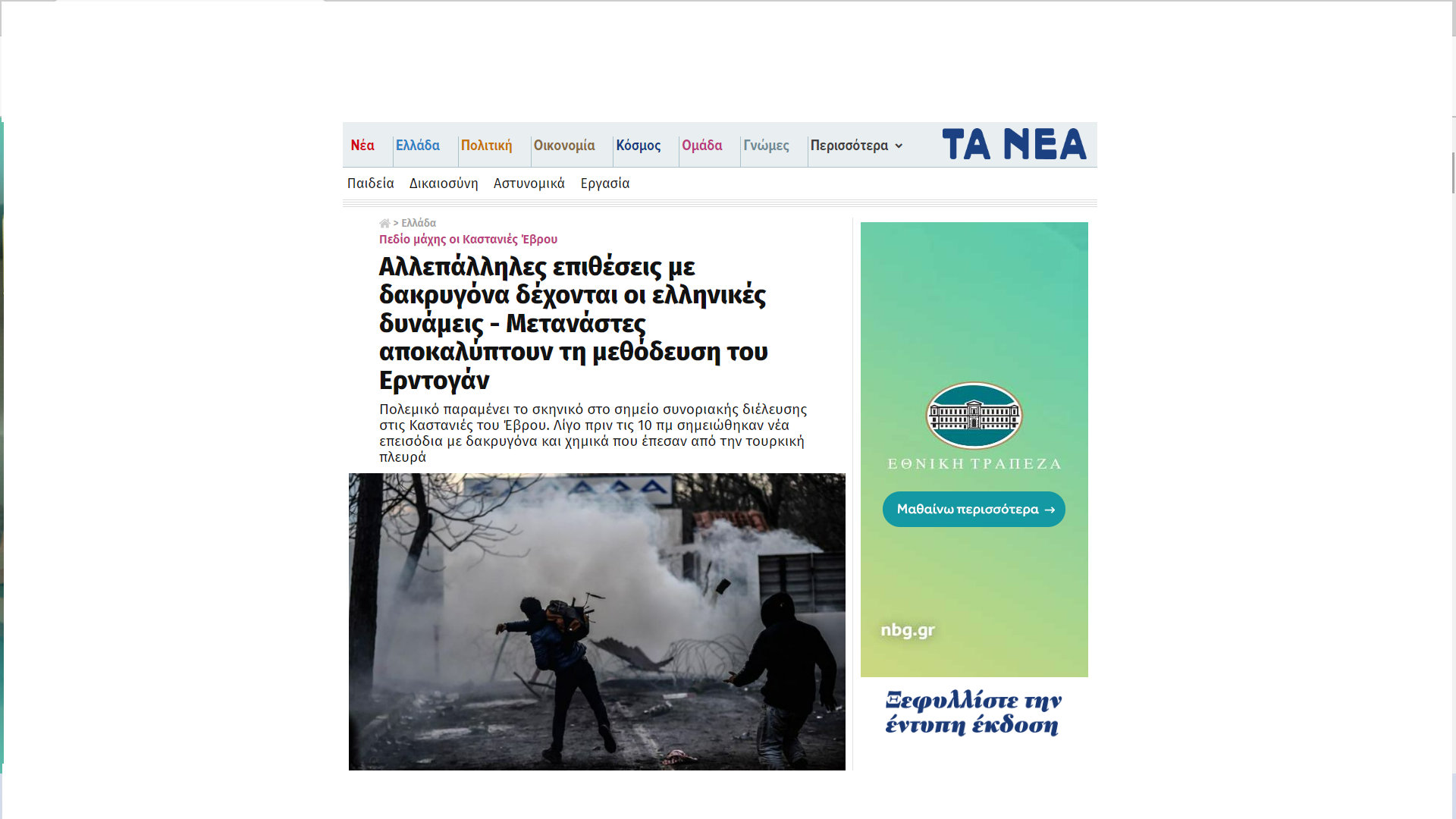


Image ten: Violence from the Turkish “side”

**Conclusion**

Greece and Türkiye have a long, complex and intertwined history that has seen conflict, wars and partnerships throughout the centuries. Immigration is just one of many issues that complicates relations between the two mediterranean neighbours, especially since 2015. Though both countries have very different political systems and cultures, at present they both are experiencing varying degrees of authoritarian populism, Türkiye being much further down this road.

Media users have a wealth of choices in terms of news sources. Saying that, in both countries there has been a turn to digital news consumption. It is story openings on news outlets’ websites that can then be shared on social media news feeds where many users experience news. In most cases, users choose not to go beyond these openings and read more. It is here where our study contributes to the study of news. by considering how these openings represent and echo governmental authoritarian populist discourses.

In Turkish news, we find that both oppositional and government supporting news outlets lean on government authoritarian populist discourses by prioritising security against risks and instability caused by the Greek “other” who are violent and (to varying degrees) responsible for the immigrant crisis. Openings also articulate the need for loyal obedience towards a strong and legitimate nation and/ or government who protects “us”. We see a slight divergence in terms of how the government itself is represented with pro-government news outlets being more openly supportive of the government and its policies than oppositional outlets. In Greek news, we find both news outlets support government policies of prioritising security against risks of stability, disorder, and conventional traditions from both Türkiye and refugees. There is a politics of fear articulated throughout coverage to legitimise restricting refugees to defend “ourselves”.

In both cases, leaning on authoritarian populism is divisive and a recipe for hatred and violence, a sentiment echoed in other scholarship (Way, 2021a; Serafis, forthcoming). Revealing how this is articulated in media’s multimodal recontextualisations highlights the need for critical scholarly interventions that study discourse in order to raise awareness and propose methods of resistance against inequalities and conflict (van Dijk, 2008; Wodak, 2021). In this study we find that digital news outlets on both sides of the Greek-Turkish border do just this – promote division, hatred of “the other” and nationalism as part of their authoritarian populist governments. In such circumstances that involve two nations with a complex and violent past, this is an example of how news does not promote the good of the nation, but inflames an already volatile situation.

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1. For details about the deal, see <https://eu.rescue.org/article/what-eu-turkey-deal> (see also Arribas 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Vocal supporters include Mitsotakis’s Minister of Internal Affairs, Makis Voridis, who served as Secretary of the Political Youth founded by Greece’s dictator, Georgios Papadopoulos, succeeding Nikos Michaloliakos, the leader of the neo-Nazi party, Golden Dawn, in this position. Mitsotakis’s Minister of Public Health, Thanos Plevris, who is renowned for being against migrant and refugee populations and the Left, is the son of the far-right, anti-Semite, homophobic persona, Kostantinos Plevris, founder of the pro-dictatorship Metaxist 4th of August Party. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)