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The logic of migratory crisification: a conceptual proposal for analyzing contemporary discourses and practices

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Introduction: This article proposes the concept of migratory crisification as an analytical framework to understand how certain dynamics of human mobility are systematically framed as social, political, and media crises. While the notion of a “migration crisis” has become pervasive in public discourse, it is rarely interrogated as a socially constructed category. We argue that crisification operates as a discursive, institutional, and affective process through which migration is transformed into an exceptional threat, legitimizing extraordinary political and policy responses. The frequent conflation between migration and refuge or asylum further intensifies this dynamic, particularly in contexts where violence or insecurity does not stem from internationally recognized armed conflicts.

Methods: The study employs a qualitative research design combining critical discourse analysis and comparative media analysis. The empirical corpus consists of 72 news articles published in the Spanish press across four key moments in the public framing of migration (2006, 2014, 2022, and 2024). These cases were selected due to their prominence in national debates and their association with distinct migratory routes and policy responses. The analysis is informed by theoretical contributions from securitization theory, moral panic scholarship, and studies on the governance of migration.

Results: The findings identify three interrelated mechanisms that structure migratory crisification: (1) alarmist narratives that frame migration as an imminent threat; (2) the institutionalization of exceptionality through emergency policies and restrictive border practices; and (3) the mobilization of collective emotions, such as fear or selective solidarity, which shape public perception and political legitimacy.

Discussion: By conceptualizing crisification as a socio-political process rather than an objective condition, this article contributes to denaturalizing the automatic association between migration and crisis and offers a framework for critically examining how such narratives are produced, circulated, and institutionalized in contemporary migration governance.

KEYWORDS

media discourse, migratory crisification, mobility governance, moral panic, securitisation

1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, the expression “migration crisis” has become increasingly commonplace in political rhetoric, media coverage, and even academic discourse. It appears in headlines reporting maritime arrivals, in parliamentary debates justifying emergency measures, and (of course) in institutional documents seeking to frame mobility within broader security or humanitarian agendas. Its recurrence is striking. Yet this very familiarity invites scrutiny. What is being described when migration is labelled as a crisis? And what political and interpretative work does that label perform?

The invocation of crisis rarely functions as a neutral descriptor. It places migration within a semantic universe marked by urgency, disruption, instability, and the most important, risk. In doing so, it shapes the terrain on which mobility is debated and governed. Describing migration as a crisis does not merely signal demographic change; it frames mobility as exceptional and potentially destabilising, thereby legitimising extraordinary forms of intervention. The language of crisis thus operates as a structuring device: it organises perception, orients policy responses, and modulates public affect.

In Spain, this vocabulary has accompanied several moments in which human mobility became highly visible at the territorial margins of the European Union. References to “waves,” “avalanches,” or “unsustainable pressure” have circulated widely in connection with maritime routes and the border enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. Such formulations do more than dramatise events; they stabilise an interpretative repertoire in which irregular arrivals are recurrently cast as symptoms of disorder or loss of control. As recent scholarship has suggested, the repeated coupling of migration and crisis contributes to consolidating the idea of mobility as a structural threat rather than as a constitutive dimension of contemporary societies (Reddy and Thiollet, 2025).

A body of research has interrogated the relationship between migration, security, and representation. Securitization theory has demonstrated how specific discursive practices transform social phenomena into existential dangers, enabling the adoption of exceptional measures (Bigo, 2002; Huysmans, 2006; Buzan et al., 1998). Work on moral panic has highlighted the role of media amplification in generating social alarm around constructed figures of deviance (Cohen, 2011; Hier, 2011). Communication scholarship, in turn, has shown how journalistic framing often privileges dramatization, simplification, and emotionalisation in the coverage of migration (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017).

These perspectives have been central in revealing how mobility becomes associated with risk, insecurity, and moral disorder. However, they tend to approach crisis as an already-constituted condition. The analytical emphasis frequently lies on the effects of crisis discourse—on public opinion, policy outcomes, or media representation—rather than on the process through which migration is repeatedly constructed as a crisis in the first place. The question, therefore, is not how migration is securitised, but how crisis itself becomes the dominant grammar through which mobility is made intelligible.

This discursive dynamic is not new. Mayblin (2017) has shown how the “asylum crisis” narrative in Europe often detaches contemporary displacement from colonial histories and geopolitical entanglements, framing arrival as a sudden rupture rather than as a consequence. Crisis language, in this sense, performs temporal compression: it isolates the present moment while erasing longer continuities. The result is an interpretative environment in which restrictive measures appear reactive rather than historically conditioned.

At the same time, crisis discourse is not applied uniformly. Bhambra (2017) argues that European political imaginaries remain structured by unacknowledged colonial hierarchies that shape perceptions of belonging. When certain mobilities are framed as threats and others as humanitarian obligations, these distinctions often follow lines of race, geography, and perceived cultural proximity. Crisis, therefore, is not simply declared; it is selectively distributed. The framing of displacement depends on who moves, from where, and under what geopolitical circumstances.

This selective dimension also intersects with what Mbembe and Corcoran (2019) conceptualises as differentiated regimes of life valuation. While necropolitics, in its strictest sense, concerns sovereignty over life and death, the broader insight is that political orders assign unequal worth to lives. Within migration governance, this differential valuation can manifest in the oscillation between empathy and suspicion, hospitality and containment. Crisis narratives participate in this economy of valuation by determining which mobilities activate care infrastructures and which activate control apparatuses.

Against this backdrop, the indiscriminate use of the term “migration crisis” contributes to naturalising an equivalence between mobility and catastrophe. It collapses distinctions between migration, asylum, refuge and irregular transit, and flattens heterogeneous experiences into a single emergency frame. In doing so, it redirects analytical focus from structural drivers of movement to managerial responses, privileging administrative capacity over rights-based frameworks.

This article addresses the conceptual gap by proposing the notion of *migration crisisification*. Rather than assuming crisis as an empirical fact, crisisification directs attention to the mechanisms that produce and at the same time, normalise the association between mobility and catastrophe. It foregrounds the processes—discursive, institutional, and affective—through which migration is rendered exceptional, urgent, and destabilising. In doing so, it allows for a more reflexive interrogation of the political implications embedded in the language of crisis.

Three interrelated mechanisms are central to this process. First, the circulation of alarmist narratives that overrepresent mobility as a threat, often drawing on metaphors of invasion, flood, or breakdown. Second, the institutionalisation of exceptionality, whereby extraordinary practices—emergency legislation, accelerated procedures, intensified border controls—become routinised within governance frameworks. Third, the mobilisation of collective emotions, including fear, anxiety, and forms of selective solidarity, shapes hierarchies of deservingness and exclusion. These mechanisms do not operate independently; rather, they reinforce one another across media discourse, political decision-making, and public perception (Wodak, 2015).

Spain offers a particularly rich context for examining these dynamics. As a southern border of the European Union and a site of multiple migration routes, it has experienced recurrent moments in which mobility became central to political and media agendas. This study focuses on 4 years—2006, 2014, 2022, and 2024—each marked by distinct configurations of routes, subjects of mobility, and institutional responses. These moments are not treated as isolated episodes, but as analytical vantage points from which to observe how crisisification is activated and selectively applied over time.

The comparative dimension is the core. Across these periods, mobility has been framed in markedly different ways—at times as disorder and threat, at others through humanitarian or solidaristic narratives. Such variation invites a closer examination of the criteria

through which certain mobilities are constructed as crises while others are normalised or even welcomed. By tracing these shifts, the analysis moves beyond the question of whether a migration crisis exists to interrogate how and under what conditions crisis narratives emerge and gain traction.

Methodologically, the article combines a critical engagement with scholarship on securitization, moral panic, and media constructions of threat with an empirical examination of headlines from major Spanish national newspapers. This dual approach allows the Spanish case to be situated within broader theoretical debates while grounding the analysis in concrete discursive practices. The objective is not to provide an exhaustive historical reconstruction of each period, but to identify recurring patterns in the articulation of crisis across time.

By conceptualising crisisification as a process rather than a fact, this study contributes to ongoing debates on the governance of mobility and the politics of representation. Seeks to unsettle the apparent self-evidence of the term “migration crisis” and to render visible the mechanisms that sustain its authority. In doing so, it invites a more critical engagement with the language through which migration is imagined, understood, debated, and governed.

2 Materials and methods

This study is grounded in a qualitative and critical research design oriented toward conceptual clarification rather than large-scale empirical measurement. Its purpose is not to quantify media coverage nor to produce an exhaustive mapping of migration discourse in Spain, but to examine how and under what conditions mobility becomes framed as a crisis. The methodological strategy, therefore, combines two interrelated components: a selective critical engagement with existing scholarship and an interpretative analysis of media texts situated in specific temporal contexts.

The theoretical review did not seek exhaustiveness in the systematic review sense. Instead, it was conceived as a problem-oriented exploration of those strands of literature that have been particularly influential in shaping the understanding of migration as a threat or emergency. The works of securitization theory (Buzan et al., 1998; Huysmans, 2006), studies on moral panic (Cohen, 2011; Hier, 2011), and critical analyses of media representations (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017; Esses et al., 2013) were revisited not simply to summarise their arguments, but to identify the conceptual assumptions through which mobility becomes intelligible as risk. This phase of the research was essential in clarifying both the strengths and the limits of existing explanatory models. While these approaches convincingly demonstrate how migration can be securitised through dramatization, they often treat crisis as an already-formed condition. The present study departs from that starting point by asking how the crisis itself is discursively produced and stabilised in the treatment of migration.

This orientation aligns the research with a critical constructivist perspective. From this standpoint, the “migration crisis” is not approached as a factual description of demographic pressure, but as a performative category whose effects unfold simultaneously at semiotic, institutional, and affective levels. Such an approach draws on traditions of discourse analysis and governmentality studies, particularly in their attention to how language, power, and institutional practice intersect (Walters, 2011). The focus is therefore less on measuring

frequency and more on tracing the logics through which certain forms of mobility are rendered exceptional, urgent, or threatening.

On the basis of this theoretical groundwork, the empirical component of the study was developed. The analysis focuses on four moments—2006, 2014, 2022, and 2024—that correspond to periods when migration became highly visible in Spanish media and political debate. These years were not selected to offer a continuous historical narrative, but because they mark distinct configurations in the relationship between routes, represented subjects, and institutional responses. They function, methodologically, as comparative windows through which variations in crisis framing can be observed.

The empirical material consists of news articles published in major Spanish newspapers during those four periods. The texts were retrieved from the database of the portal <https://medios.mugak.eu>, a platform specialising in migration and human rights coverage in Spain. The database was chosen because it provides curated access to relevant journalistic material on migration while allowing chronological filtering. The aim was not to assemble a statistically representative sample, but to identify pieces that had visibility or resonance within public debate. For each year, at least five news items were selected, prioritising those that explicitly or implicitly articulated migration through the language of crisis, urgency, or exception.

The analytical process unfolded in stages, though not in a strictly linear manner. An initial screening of the corpus identified recurrent thematic emphases and framing tendencies. This preliminary reading helped to detect patterns in metaphor usage, subject typification, and the framing of institutional responses. Subsequently, a more detailed critical discourse analysis was undertaken, focusing on linguistic constructions, narrative structures, and implicit assumptions about mobility and belonging. Particular attention was paid to metaphorical repertoires—such as references to floods, waves or invasions—that suggest naturalised or uncontrollable movement (see Table 1).

As indicated in Table 1, the operational indicators of crisisification were structured around three core mechanisms—alarmist narrative, institutionalisation of exceptionality, and emotional mobilisation—each examined through textual, visual, and contextual markers. These indicators did not function as rigid coding categories but as analytical lenses guiding the interpretation of the selected material.

As a result, throughout the empirical reading, four interrelated analytical dimensions—derived from and embedded within the indicators outlined in Table 1—structured the interpretative process. First,

TABLE 1 Operational indicators of crisisification (own elaboration).

Mechanism	Textual indicators	Visual indicators	Contextual indicators
Alarmist narrative	Metaphors of invasion (“wave,” “avalanche”)	Mass images	Sensationalist headlines
Institutionalisation of exceptionalism	References to “urgent measures”	Images of security forces	Government statements
Emotional mobilisation	Emotional language (fear/compassion)	Faces of suffering/threat	Citizen reactions

the dominant narrative frame employed in the text, corresponding primarily to the alarmist mechanism and its textual indicators. Second, the typification of migrant subjects—whether portrayed as victims, threats, burdens, or beneficiaries—which intersected with both emotional mobilisation and narrative framing. Third, the presentation of institutional measures as necessary, legitimate, or urgent responses, directly linked to the mechanism of institutionalised exceptionality. And fourth, the emotional tone mobilised, including fear, anxiety, compassion, or forms of selective solidarity, corresponding to the affective indicators identified in the table.

From this iterative engagement between literature and corpus, three recurring mechanisms were systematised: alarmist narrative, institutionalisation of exceptionality, and emotional mobilisation. These mechanisms—operationalised in Table 1 through textual, visual, and contextual indicators—provided the analytical architecture for the comparative reading of the four temporal moments.

Rather than functioning as abstract theoretical categories, they were examined through the concrete dimensions visible in the material itself: how migration was narratively framed, how migrant subjects were typified, how institutional responses were legitimised, and how collective emotions were activated or modulated. In this sense, Table 1 does not merely summarise findings; it organises the analytical entry points through which the empirical corpus was interpreted.

The methodological proposal developed here should therefore be understood as both analytical and exploratory. It offers a structured way of identifying how crisis narratives are assembled, while remaining open to further refinement. Future research could expand the corpus, incorporate multimodal analysis of images and audiovisual content, or extend the comparison to other national contexts. This research provides a conceptual scaffold—grounded in empirical reading—that makes visible the processes by which migration is repeatedly framed as a crisis in Spanish media discourse.

3 Ethics

The study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Pontifical University of Comillas. The research team securely stored the data. For publication, all identifying information was anonymised and replaced with variables such as gender, country of origin, and current residence.

4 Results

The literature analysis identified three fundamental mechanisms by which migration is systematically transformed into a “crisis.” These mechanisms should not be understood as isolated processes, but rather as interconnected dynamics that, when combined, produce and consolidate the crisisification of migration in different contexts.

4.1 2006: the Atlantic route and the consolidation of the crisis frame

The year 2006 marked a turning point in Spanish media coverage of maritime migration. The increased visibility of arrivals to the

Canary Islands—popularly framed as the “cayucos crisis”—coincided with heightened political attention and European diplomatic engagement. Although migratory routes to Spain had been active for years, 2006 became symbolically consolidated as a moment of exceptional pressure.

4.1.1 Alarmist narrative

The headlines published during this period reveal a consistent reliance on metaphors of saturation and overflow. Expressions such as “avalanche,” “massive arrival,” or “serious crisis” constructed migration as a sudden and potentially uncontrollable phenomenon. The recurrent presentation of figures without contextual comparison further reinforced this perception. Numbers were displayed as evidence of magnitude but rarely situated within broader demographic or geopolitical frames.

In addition, coverage tended to displace attention from migrant subjects toward the state’s apparatus. Political leaders, diplomatic initiatives, and technical reinforcements occupied the centre of the narrative, while migrants appeared as anonymous masses. The border was implicitly framed as a site of defence rather than as a space of rights.

The main discursive and institutional features identified in 2006 coverage are summarised in Table 2.

As Table 2 indicates, the crisis frame operated not only through alarmist vocabulary but also through a structural emphasis on institutional reaction. The problem was articulated primarily as a matter of management and control, rather than as a question of rights or humanitarian protection.

4.1.2 Institutionalisation of exceptionality

Beyond discursive framing, 2006 coverage repeatedly highlighted urgent diplomatic meetings, reinforcement of Frontex operations, and

TABLE 2 Discursive and institutional indicators of crisisification in 2014 (own elaboration).

Dimension	Date	Newspaper	Headline
Metaphors of collapse	31/08/2006	Canarias 7	“11,826 immigrants moved to the Peninsula in 2006”
Diplomatic crisis	30/08/2006	El correo	“Spain expresses its “disappointment” to the EU over its lack of support during the crisis”
Focus on state response	30/08/2006	Diario Vasco	“The government announces a diplomatic offensive to make immigration a priority”
Absence of subjects	31/08/2006	Canarias 7	“11,826 immigrants moved to the Peninsula in 2006”

increased maritime surveillance. These measures were presented as necessary and legitimate responses to an extraordinary situation. Cooperation with the European Union and external partners appeared as emergency diplomacy rather than routine governance.

Such representations contributed to normalising exceptional management as the appropriate response to migration. The language of urgency became embedded within institutional discourse, transforming temporary measures into recurrent strategies.

4.1.3 Emotional mobilisation

Emotional registers during this period were relatively muted. Migrants were seldom individualised and portrayed through personal narratives. Compassion appeared marginal, subordinated to logistical and security concerns. The absence of personalised storytelling reinforced depersonalisation, further consolidating the perception of migration as a technical emergency rather than a human process.

Taken together, the 2006 coverage illustrates how alarmist language, institutional urgency, and emotional distancing converged to stabilise migration as a crisis. The framing did not merely reflect increased arrivals; it actively constructed them as exceptional and destabilising.

4.2 2014: Melilla and the consolidation of fortification

If 2006 consolidated the Atlantic route as a symbolic site of crisis, 2014 marked the intensification of attention toward Spain's land borders in Ceuta and Melilla. That year was characterised by a visible increase in attempts to cross the Melilla fence and by the deaths of at least 14 people at Tarajal beach in Ceuta. Migration became not only a matter of arrival figures but a highly mediated spectacle of border confrontation. The fence itself—its height, reinforcement, and technological upgrades—entered the centre of public discourse.

4.2.1 Alarmist narrative

The headlines published during 2014 reveal a consolidation of crisis language, now structured around the imagery of assault and siege. Recurrent references to “massive attempts,” “avalanches,” and “jumps over the fence” framed mobility as an aggressive action directed at national territory. Quantitative emphasis intensified: figures were foregrounded as proof of scale and persistence, often detached from broader contextualisation.

This numeric insistence did more than inform; it created a sense of accumulation and inevitability. The repetition of large figures across outlets contributed to constructing the border as permanently under pressure. Migration was not narrated as movement shaped by geopolitical dynamics, but as an ongoing test of state capacity. The fence, in this narrative, appeared not as a legal boundary but as a defensive infrastructure resisting external force.

The metaphor of the wall gained symbolic centrality. Technical descriptions of anti-climb mesh, reinforcement measures, and surveillance operations displaced the human dimension of mobility. Migrants were portrayed as bodies attempting to breach, to sneak in, or to force entry. Such vocabulary naturalised the border as a site of protection and migration as an intrusion.

TABLE 3 Discursive and institutional indicators of crisisification in 2014 (own elaboration).

Exceptional measures	Date	Newspaper	Headline
Physical border security	13/07/2014	Diario de Noticias de Álava	“The fence in Melilla celebrates one month with anti-climb mesh”
Immediate returns	02/05/2014	Diario de Noticias (EP)	“Spain returns seven immigrants who arrived in Chafarinas to Morocco”
Outsourcing and delegation	28/05/2014	El País	“Around 2,000 African migrants attempt to jump Melilla border fence”
Restriction of internal rights	09/03/2014	Público	“Asylum seekers detained in Ceuta and Melilla”

4.2.2 Institutionalisation of exceptionality

Alongside this alarmist framing, 2014 witnessed the normalisation of exceptional practices. Media coverage repeatedly referred to summary returns, enhanced cooperation with Morocco, and FRONTEX's operational involvement. Measures that involved suspending or reinterpreting established legal guarantees were presented in procedural language as logistical or technical responses to pressure.

The practice of immediate returns—frequently described without explicit legal commentary—illustrates this process. Headlines documenting expulsions framed them as routine enforcement rather than as controversial acts potentially conflicting with the principle of non-refoulement. In parallel, references to the expansion of European cooperation reinforced the idea that border control required coordinated emergency action. The main discursive and institutional features observed in 2014 are summarised in Table 3.

As Table 3 indicates, the crisis frame in 2014 extended beyond mere rhetoric. It was reinforced through the representation of legal and technical measures as necessary and proportionate responses to border pressure. The language of emergency gradually became embedded within administrative normality.

4.2.3 Emotional mobilisation

Fear dominated the emotional register of 2014 coverage. The emphasis on simultaneous entries, images of groups climbing the fence, and references to institutional overload generated a climate of

symbolic insecurity. Migrants were rarely individualised; instead, they appeared as collective actors associated with force and persistence.

The Tarajal episode briefly introduced a different emotional tone. The deaths of 14 people provoked public outrage and intensified debate over accountability, responsibility, and the human cost of border enforcement. For a moment, media coverage appeared to foreground vulnerability and loss rather than pressure or irregularity. However, this shift proved fragile. Even within the same reporting cycle, institutional voices and security frameworks quickly regained centrality.

For example, press coverage on 6 February 2014 framed the episode through the language of border defence, stating that “Moroccan security forces and the Civil Guard have repelled [...] an attempt by “some 400 immigrants of sub-Saharan origin” to enter Spanish territory.” *Europa Press* (06/02/2014). The emphasis on “repelling” an “attempt of entry” by a quantified group subtly reinstated the grammar of control, scale, and containment. The narrative focus moved from the deaths to the management of a border incident involving a large collective body.

Taken together, the 2014 coverage illustrates a deepening of crisisification through fortification. The border was not only represented as under threat but as an experimental site where exceptional practices could be tested and normalised. In this sense, Melilla functioned as a laboratory of governance, consolidating a model in which security increasingly displaced rights within public discourse.

4.3 2022: humanitarian exceptionalism and selective solidarity

In contrast to the security-driven framing observed in 2006 and 2014, the year 2022 marked a notable shift in the media representation of displacement in Spain. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February, Spain—like other European countries—activated the Temporary Protection Directive and rapidly expanded reception infrastructures. The visibility of Ukrainian refugees in public debate was immediate and sustained, but the narrative tone differed markedly from previous crisis episodes.

4.3.1 Alarmist narrative

Unlike earlier moments, alarmist metaphors were largely absent from the coverage of Ukrainian arrivals. The vocabulary of invasion, overflow, or assault gave way to a humanitarian register centred on protection, welcome, and assistance. Numerical references were present—often highlighting the scale of reception or the speed of administrative processing—but they did not operate as markers of threat. Instead, figures were mobilised to demonstrate institutional capacity and solidarity.

This discursive shift does not imply the disappearance of crisis language altogether. Rather, crisis was reframed. Instead of being attached to the arrival of refugees, the crisis was relocated to the war itself. Migration ceased to be constructed as the destabilising factor; it was narrated as the direct consequence of an external geopolitical emergency. As one newspaper coverage from June 2022 made explicit, the focus was placed on the war as the source of rupture, implicitly dissociating refugee reception from domestic disorder (“Hundreds of professionals and volunteers in Castile and León work hard every day to support Ukrainian refugees in “normalizing” their lives. Teaching Spanish and processing documents are among their tasks” *ABC*,

20/06/2022). In this reframing, mobility was not portrayed as a problem requiring containment, but as a morally justified response.

This shift is analytically significant. By situating crisis outside the national space—within the theatre of war rather than at the border—the arrival of displaced persons could be incorporated into a humanitarian narrative without activating the usual grammars of pressure or overload. Crisis language persisted, but its referent changed. The destabilising force was externalised, and mobility became the ethical outcome of geopolitical violence rather than its domestic manifestation. In this way, the discourse temporarily suspended the equivalence between migration and crisis that had characterised previous moments.

4.3.2 Institutionalisation of exceptionality

Although the emotional tone differed from earlier years, the mechanism of exceptionality remained present—albeit in a transformed mode. Reception centres were opened, schools reopened or expanded, and administrative procedures accelerated. Municipalities, NGOs, and regional governments coordinated efforts to provide housing, education, and healthcare. These measures were extraordinary in scale and speed, yet they were represented positively as necessary acts of solidarity.

In this sense, 2022 exemplifies humanitarian exceptionalism. The state demonstrated its capacity to deploy rapid and coordinated responses when a displaced population was perceived as deserving of protection. Exceptional measures were not framed as security controls, but as infrastructures of care. However, the very fact that such measures could be mobilised so swiftly also revealed their conditional nature. Exceptional reception appeared possible when the subjects involved were recognised as culturally proximate and geopolitically aligned.

The main discursive and institutional features observed in 2022 are summarised in [Table 4](#).

As [Table 4](#) shows, the mechanisms associated with crisisification did not disappear; they were reconfigured. The institutionalisation of exceptionality persisted, but its normative orientation shifted from deterrence to care.

TABLE 4 Discursive and institutional indicators of crisisification in 2022 (own elaboration).

Discursive strategy	Date	Newspaper	Headline
Personalisation of refugee	13/06/2022	El Periódico	“Ruslana, the first baby born to a refugee mother”
Narratives of welcome and gratitude	4/04/2022	La Razón	“Cubo de Bureba (Burgos) rallies around 28 Ukrainians passing through”
Language of affection, hope and promise	20/06/2022	ABC	“An army of peace far from the bombs”

4.3.3 Emotional mobilisation

The emotional register of 2022 was predominantly compassionate. Media narratives frequently centred on individual stories: mothers with children, elderly people fleeing bombardment, families reunited. This personalisation humanised displaced subjects and fostered a sense of collective responsibility. Unlike in previous years, migrants were not depicted as anonymous masses but as identifiable individuals.

Yet this compassion was not politically neutral. The differential treatment of Ukrainian refugees compared to other displaced populations exposed the selective nature of solidarity. While African or Middle Eastern arrivals had previously been framed through security metaphors, Ukrainian refugees were portrayed as neighbours, Europeans, or victims of an unjust war. The contrast suggests that emotional mobilisation operates within hierarchies shaped by race, geography, and cultural proximity.

Moreover, signs of tension emerged as the reception process continued. While the initial phase of Ukrainian displacement was marked by rapid institutional mobilisation and broad public empathy, local resistance soon began to surface in specific territorial contexts. Debates over public expenditure, administrative capacity, and the siting of accommodation facilities revealed how quickly humanitarian consensus could become contested. For instance, press coverage in 2022 reported that “The PP will request that the transfer of land for the construction of a refugee centre in Azuqueca be canceled ‘immediately.’” Such interventions illustrate that even in contexts framed primarily through solidarity, the language of urgency and exception can gradually shift toward concerns about local burden, infrastructure pressure, or fiscal responsibility.

In this sense, humanitarian exceptionalism does not necessarily suspend securitising logic; rather, it may temporarily displace them. As the immediate emotional impulse stabilises, solidaristic framing can give way to more managerial or defensive discourses. The empirical material suggests that crisisfication is therefore not unidirectional. Even when mobility is initially constructed as deserving of protection, the underlying architecture of exceptionality contains the potential for re-securitisation.

Taken together, the 2022 coverage complicates a linear reading of crisisfication. Migration was not represented as a threat; however, the activation of extraordinary institutional measures and the selective mobilisation of empathy demonstrate that crisis narratives can assume different normative orientations. The absence of alarmist vocabulary does not imply the absence of exceptional logic. Rather, it highlights how crisisfication can be suspended, redirected, and reconfigured depending on the subjects involved and the geopolitical context.

4.4 2024: punitive securitisation and the reactivation of the crisis frame

By 2024, media attention shifted toward maritime arrivals to the Balearic Islands, particularly from Algeria and other North African contexts. Although fluctuations in arrivals had occurred in previous years, coverage during this period intensified around record numbers, operational strain, and the criminalisation of specific transit actors. In contrast to the humanitarian tone that characterised 2022, the narrative register in 2024 largely reactivated the vocabulary of urgency and control.

4.4.1 Alarmist narrative

Headlines from this period frequently relied on quantitative escalation and metaphors of recurrence. Expressions such as “new wave,” “record number,” or “Christmas surge” framed arrivals as cyclical threats requiring constant vigilance. The repetition of weekly figures and intercepted boats constructed an image of persistent pressure.

Unlike 2022, when numbers served as evidence of institutional generosity, in 2024, they were mobilised to signal overload and saturation at the centres. The territory was implicitly mapped as vulnerable, with specific islands named as points of breach. This cartographic emphasis reinforced the sense of encroachment and territorial fragility.

The narrative increasingly individualised risk through the figure of the “skipper” or alleged criminal actor. Reports linking migration routes to offences such as assault or confrontation with police forces amplified the association between mobility and deviance. Even when such incidents were isolated, their prominence in headlines contributed to a broader climate of suspicion.

4.4.2 Institutionalisation of exceptionality

Institutional responses were framed primarily through the language of surveillance. References to interceptions at sea, coordinated patrol operations, and judicial proceedings against facilitators of transit featured prominently. The technical vocabulary of maritime control—“intercepted,” “detained,” “monitored,” “rammed patrol boat”—conveyed a sense of operational intensity.

While these measures were presented as routine enforcement of migration law, their cumulative representation suggested a state of constant alert. Exceptionalism reappeared not as a temporary emergency but as a stabilised security posture. Unlike 2022, where institutional capacity was framed through care infrastructure, in 2024, it was articulated through policing capacity and penal accountability.

The principal discursive and institutional features identified in the 2024 coverage are summarised in [Table 5](#).

As [Table 5](#) indicates, the crisis frame in 2024 operated through a combination of numerical amplification and penal emphasis. Migration was re-situated within a grammar of law enforcement rather than humanitarian obligation.

4.4.3 Emotional mobilisation

The emotional register accompanying this coverage was dominated by anxiety and suspicion. Whereas 2022 centred on empathy and personalisation, 2024 coverage tended toward depersonalisation. Migrants appeared primarily as anonymous figures counted, intercepted, or associated with incidents. Individual stories were largely absent, and when present, were often tied to criminal allegations or conflictual encounters.

This shift underscores the selective nature of emotional mobilisation. The same institutional capacity that had been framed as protective in 2022 was now framed as defensive. The contrast reveals that crisisfication does not depend solely on numbers or routes. It depends on the symbolic positioning of the subjects involved. Compassion and suspicion emerge not as neutral reactions to movement, but as mediated responses shaped by race, geography, and political context.

TABLE 5 Discursive and institutional indicators of crisisification in 2024 (own elaboration).

Narrative resource	Date	Newspaper	Headline
Quantitative hyperbole	04/09/2024	La Razón	“The Algerian route to the Balearic Islands is reactivated: more than 260 people arrive in one day”
	03/12/2024	El Mundo	Alarm in the Balearic Islands as the number of small boats arriving doubles in a year: more than 5,000 people have already arrived and more and more speedboats are being ‘hunted down’.
Metaphors of natural siege	01/12/2024	El Mundo	“The Christmas wave of migrants also reaches the Balearic Islands”
Individual criminalisation	04/12/2024	La Vanguardia	“16 migrants arrested for the rape of a minor on a boat that arrived in Formentera”
Police-institutional jargon	19/11/2024	La Razón	“Five small boats carrying 86 people have been intercepted upon arrival in Ibiza, Formentera, and Cabrera.”

Taken together, the 2024 coverage signals a clear reactivation of punitive securitisation. The logic of migration as threat returned to prominence, structured around operational vigilance and criminal accountability. If 2022 demonstrated that crisisification can be reoriented toward humanitarian exceptionalism, 2024 illustrates how rapidly the security paradigm can reassert itself. The crisis, in this sense, is not a stable condition but a flexible narrative technology—one that oscillates between care and control while maintaining the underlying logic of exception.

5 Discussion

The analysis of the four selected moments demonstrates that the migration crisis does not operate as a sporadic rhetorical exaggeration, but as a patterned mode of governance that links discourse, institutional practice, and collective affect. The findings confirm that alarmist narratives, the institutionalisation of exceptionality, and emotional mobilisation do not function as isolated mechanisms; rather, they form a relational structure through which mobility is rendered intelligible as disturbance, urgency, or selective moral obligation. In this sense, crisisification provides a conceptual bridge between securitization theory, moral panic scholarship, and critical media studies, while extending their explanatory reach.

The empirical material suggests that securitization, as theorised by Buzan et al. (1998), captures only one dimension of the process. Indeed, the speech acts identified in 2006, 2014, and 2024—metaphors of invasion, quantitative escalation, policing vocabulary—clearly perform the transformation of migration into a matter of security. However, the Spanish case also reveals that securitizing moves do not remain confined to the performative moment. Through repetition across media cycles and institutional routines, they sediment into an ordinary grammar of governance. Crisisification, therefore, complements securitization theory by highlighting how the exceptional becomes normalised over time, exceeding the initial declaration of threat.

This dynamic resonates with Mayblin’s (2017) critique of the “asylum crisis” narrative, which exposes how crisis language obscures the structural and colonial genealogies of displacement while legitimising restrictive responses in the present. In the European context, the framing of asylum as crisis frequently detaches contemporary arrivals from longer histories of geopolitical entanglement, producing what Mayblin describes as a form of historical amnesia that renders exclusionary measures politically palatable.

At the same time, the normalisation of emergency identified in the 2014 coverage of Melilla echoes broader debates on the institutionalisation of exception. As Agamben (2005) has argued, the state of exception increasingly operates not as a temporary suspension of the norm but as a durable mode of governance. Similarly, Foucault’s reflections on security dispositifs suggest that emergency rationalities can become embedded within routine administrative practices, blurring the boundary between extraordinary intervention and normal regulation (Foucault, 2007). In this sense, the repeated media representation of summary returns, reinforced fences, and externalised border controls did not merely respond to a perceived emergency; it contributed to consolidating an enduring horizon of crisis.

The 2014 coverage of Melilla thus did more than frame border crossings as disruptive events; it stabilised a political imaginary in which fortification and expedited removals appeared as pragmatic necessities. The crisis was not presented as a temporary rupture but as a recurring condition requiring constant vigilance. What emerges is a permanent temporality of emergency—one that aligns with Huysmans’ (2006) account of the politics of insecurity, where the management of unease becomes routinised within governance structures.

The crisis frame therefore performs a double move: it dramatizes the immediacy of the present while simultaneously embedding exceptional measures within the architecture of normal governance as Walters framework (2011). Through repetition across media and

institutional discourse, exception ceases to appear exceptional; it becomes the background condition through which mobility is interpreted and regulated.

At a broader level, these findings invite us to revisit [Bhambra's \(2017\)](#) reflections on the coloniality embedded in European crisis narratives. Bhambra reminds us that Europe's understanding of itself—its boundaries, its solidarities, its hierarchies—cannot be disentangled from longer imperial histories that continue to shape perceptions of belonging. From this perspective, the language of crisis does not emerge in a vacuum; it is situated within historically sedimented distinctions about who is recognised as part of a shared political community and who remains positioned at its margins.

The contrast between 2022 and 2024 becomes particularly telling in this regard. The displacement of Ukrainians was widely framed as a humanitarian tragedy that called for protection, empathy, and rapid institutional response. By contrast, arrivals from North Africa were more often narrated through suspicion, criminalisation, and border vigilance. While differences in geopolitical context certainly matter, the divergence in framing cannot be reduced to numbers or logistical capacity alone. Rather, it appears intertwined with deeper hierarchies of recognition.

[Panagiotidis \(2025\)](#), in his analysis of what he terms the “sameing” of Ukrainian refugee migration, shows how Ukrainians were discursively positioned as culturally proximate and civilisationally aligned—implicitly constructed as “like us.” This process of symbolic facilitated a politics of identification that made solidarity appear natural and even self-evident. What is striking is not simply the presence of compassion, but the ease with which it was activated through narratives of similarity.

By contrast, [Marino and Hategekimana \(2025\)](#), in their study of crisis framing in Ceuta and Melilla, demonstrate how border events involving African migrants are repeatedly structured through logics of pressure, disorder, and securitised management. In such contexts, crisis discourse does not operate primarily as a call for protection but as a rationale for containment. Their analysis underscores how media framing contributes to stabilising the southern border as a space of vigilance and fortification rather than of refuge.

The Spanish material examined here resonates with these broader patterns. The swift institutional mobilisation in 2022 revealed that expansive protection mechanisms are both legally and administratively possible when displaced populations are symbolically integrated within the imagined European community. Yet the re-securitised framing of North African arrivals in 2024 reactivated long-standing associations between mobility, irregularity, and threat. What emerges, therefore, is not simply a shift in tone but a differentiation in the symbolic positioning of migrant subjects.

In this light, a crisis in migration appears to be a selective process. It does not merely react to mobility as such; it mediates mobility through historically informed distinctions about proximity, legitimacy, and risk. The crisis frame thus becomes stratified. Some forms of displacement are incorporated within narratives of shared vulnerability, while others are filtered through grammars of defence and control. Seen in this way, crisis narratives do not only describe events—they participate in reproducing the hierarchies that structure contemporary migration governance.

The affective dimension identified in the results further complicates classical securitization approaches. The mobilisation of fear in 2006, 2014, and 2024 aligns with moral panic theory ([Cohen, 2011](#)), which holds that disproportionate threat constructions produce social alarm. Yet the Spanish case demonstrates that emotional mobilisation

is not limited to fear. In 2022, compassion and solidarity were equally powerful collective affects, generating what has been described here as humanitarian exceptionalism. This does not represent the suspension of crisis but its reorientation. Exceptional measures were deployed not to repel but to receive. The logic of exception remained intact; what shifted was its normative direction. The crisis was externalised (war) rather than internalised (arrival), allowing solidarity to coexist with extraordinary governance.

It is precisely at this intersection of exceptionality and affect that [Mbembe and Corcoran's \(2019\)](#) reflections on necropolitics acquire analytical relevance. Mbembe's work directs our attention to the differentiated distribution of exposure, vulnerability, and protection that structures contemporary political orders. While the Spanish case examined here does not replicate the extreme sovereign configurations of death-worlds that Mbembe analyses, the empirical material nonetheless reveals more subtle gradations in the valuation of migrant lives. The oscillation between empathy and suspicion observed across the four temporal moments signals that mobility is not simply governed; it is hierarchised.

This insight becomes particularly salient when read alongside debates on border (in)security and human security in the European context ([Panebianco and Tallis, 2022](#)). The proliferation of insecurities at European borders has been shown to generate overlapping and sometimes competing logics of protection. What the present analysis suggests is that these logics are not distributed evenly across migrant subjects. Some bodies are rendered grievable and worthy of rapid institutional protection; others are framed primarily as risks requiring surveillance, containment, or procedural management. The border thus operates as a site where state security and human security do not simply collide, but where they are selectively aligned.

Crisification contributes to this differentiated ordering. By repeatedly framing certain mobilities as urgent humanitarian emergencies and others as destabilising pressures, crisis discourse structures an implicit economy of life valuation. It shapes whose suffering becomes publicly visible and whose presence is problematised as administrative overload or security concern. In this sense, the border is not merely a territorial line nor solely a space of juridical enforcement; it becomes a political arena in which vulnerability is classified.

Mbembe's necropolitical lens allows us to see that this differentiation is not reducible to individual prejudice or episodic policy decisions. Rather, it reflects broader regimes of perception and governance in which the capacity to grant protection, delay it, or withhold it altogether is unevenly exercised. The Spanish cases analysed here do not point to a uniform regime of exclusion; instead, they reveal a fluctuating but patterned distinction between lives that are swiftly incorporated into humanitarian narratives and lives that remain suspended within logics of containment. Crisification, therefore, operates not only as a discursive mechanism but as a mediating device that shapes how life, risk, and responsibility are politically distributed.

Taken together, the four moments analysed show that crisis is neither uniform nor static. It shifts in tone—from alarm to compassion and back to securitised vigilance—but maintains an underlying logic of exceptionality. Even when humanitarian narratives dominate, as in 2022, governance remains organised around extraordinary activation rather than structural inclusion. The recurrent recourse to emergency frameworks displaces the language of rights with the language of management. Migrants appear alternately as threats or victims, but rarely as political subjects endowed with agency.

The central contribution of this study lies not merely in describing crisis narratives but in conceptualising the mechanisms and the logic that sustain them. By foregrounding crisification as a process, the analysis denaturalises the seemingly self-evident category of “migration crisis” and exposes its productive effects. Crisification functions as a technology of governance: it legitimises exceptional interventions, shapes public emotions, and structures hierarchies of belonging. Recognising this dynamic invites a reorientation of analytical attention—from measuring flows or counting arrivals to interrogating the discursive and institutional architectures that render mobility governable as an emergency.

At an epistemological level, this shift has implications for how migration is studied. If crisis is understood not as an objective condition but as a constructed frame, then research must remain attentive to the historical, racialized, and affective dimensions through which that frame is activated. The Spanish case suggests that the language of crisis is both flexible and resilient, capable of accommodating both compassion and control. Future comparative work could explore how these mechanisms operate in other border regimes, and whether humanitarian exceptionalism represents a temporary deviation or an alternative modality within the broader logic of crisification.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Pontifical University of Comillas. Data was securely stored by the research team. For publication, all identifying information was anonymised and replaced with variables such as gender, country of origin, and current residence.

Author contributions

CE: Resources, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Software, Visualization,

Data curation, Methodology, Conceptualization, Validation, Project administration, Investigation, Supervision.

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The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. Generative AI tools were used in a limited and supplementary capacity to assist with data organization and preliminary media analysis. All theoretical development, interpretation of findings, and final manuscript writing were conducted by the author.

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