
Politicising the Visual Representations of a Refugee 'Crisis'

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Abstract

Images of refugees reaching the borders of Europe overwhelmed the media during 2015. The phenomenon was framed as a 'crisis' and its visual representations played a crucial role in shaping policies and politics of states, political parties, NGOs and voluntary groups. Notably, some politicians used such representations to raise panic and promote a further securitisation of Europe, while numerous NGOs and volunteers in an attempt to attract attention and support. This paper examines how the politicised visual representations of the 'crisis' affected the situation and the inhabitants of Skala Sykamias, a tiny village in Greece which became the de-facto "gate" to Europe. It is based on the analysis of visual data, narrative interviews and photo-elicitation which were conducted in an ethnography study with locals and volunteers in Skala Sykamias during the spring of 2017. The paper argues that in the early summer of 2015, images that were circulated through the media had an agentic role in attracting humanitarian assistance and attention. Later representations were used to create a heroic portrait of the villagers which nevertheless shaped a space of moral alibi for the Greek state and the E.U., leaving the burden of the assistance mainly to NGOs, volunteers and the locals. Finally, it also explores how the villagers experienced that process of visualisation and how specific representations led to disputes between them.

Keywords: refugee crisis, visual representations, media, Skala Sykamias

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