



The political ecology of wildfire: Media and the politics of blame in the Evros wildfires in Greece

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ABSTRACT

Wildfires are not only natural disasters but also political events. Media plays an important role in the power-laden process of meaning-making and responsibility-assigning that can significantly shape how societies understand and respond to wildfires. To shed light on the role of media in the political ecology of wildfire, we conducted a framing analysis of 241 news articles on the Evros wildfires in Greece. We discovered five narratives of blame: migrant activities, government mismanagement, climate change, arson, and war. We argued that the politics of blame in the Greek context is deeply intertwined with the rise of national populism and xenophobic attitudes as a response to the European refugee crisis. This is evidenced by a dominant narrative that blamed transnational migrants as culprits. The blame politics of wildfires in Greece is also shaped by the political economy of the media that enhances state control over media narratives.

1. Introduction

Wildfire studies have traditionally focused on the physical and ecological aspects of fire, such as forest ecology, climate and climate change, atmospheric science, and soil and water ecology (Haghani et al., 2022; Mamuji and Rozdilsky, 2019; Tedim and Leone, 2020; Thakur et al., 2021). Recently, there has been a growing interest in the human dimension of wildfires, including public attitudes towards wildfires, the acceptability of fire and fuels management, community preparedness and planning, public responses during fires, fire communication, and post-fire recovery (Burtz and Bright, 2014; Jacobson et al., 2022; Lambrou et al., 2023; McCaffrey et al., 2012; Remenick, 2018). Despite recent advancements, a gap remains in wildfire studies concerning the political dimension—the political processes that occur before, during, and after wildfires, which shape how societies understand and respond to these events (González-Hidalgo et al., 2014).

Drawing on the theory of political ecology, this paper examines the political dimension of wildfires by focusing on the role of media in the politics of blame. It draws attention to the power-laden process of meaning-making and responsibility-assigning for damaging natural events such as wildfires—which can significantly shape public perceptions and actions and drive transformative policy change (Nohrstedt, 2022). For instance, the attribution of wildfires to climate change has

become common in media narratives and has been adopted as a strategy by academics and activists to stimulate public action on climate change (Lahsen et al., 2020). Thus, the attribution of blame and responsibility is also a cornerstone of political change. The perception of a government as responsible for what went wrong can lead to significant political fallout (Malhotra and Kuo, 2008). While forest fires are highly complex phenomena caused by multiple natural and socioeconomic processes, the politics of blame may involve the articulation of certain culprits for political purposes. How wildfire events are narrated and for what political purposes is highly complex as framing choices depend on contextual political meanings and particularities of place (Walker et al., 2020). Thus, more studies are required on the blame politics of wildfire to capture the ways through which blame is constructed and the situations in which such framing decisions are made (Crow et al., 2017). Furthermore, few studies have focused on the social inequality of wildfire narratives. In particular, the relationship between marginalized groups and the blame politics of wildfires has not been sufficiently analyzed (Askland et al., 2022; Méndez et al., 2020).

This study was conducted in Greece, a country with a long history of politicizing wildfires (Hovardas, 2014). For instance, during and after the 2018 Mati wildfire, the government faced extensive criticism from the media and political opponents regarding its management of the crisis. Meanwhile, members of the left-wing government and party

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framed the event through a class war perspective, blaming the wealthy for bypassing regulations to construct illegal holiday homes in a lush forest (Triantafyllidou and Yannas, 2023). We draw on a case study of the 2023 Evros wildfire. In August 2023, Evros, the northeastern part of Greece, had the largest wildfire in the country and Europe's history, which burned around a million acres (Dosiou et al., 2024). The catastrophic wildfire destroyed approximately half of Dadia Forest, which is significant for Europe's biodiversity-protected region (Iliopoulos et al., 2021). The Evros fire also caused significant socioeconomic damage, particularly in Alexandroupolis, where 48 % of the municipality's land was affected. The Evros forest fire attracted the attention of global news coverage as transnational migrants found refuge there and some were killed by the fire (Kitsantonis, 2023; Westfall, 2023). The Evros wildfire triggered an intense politics of blame. The case of burned migrants was used to fuel the narrative of the government, who implied that the Evros wildfires were the result of arson by refugees crossing the border from Turkey into Greece.

This study sheds light on the blame politics following the Evros wildfire through a qualitative analysis of news articles. The key research question that this study aims to address is: what are the dominant frames and blame narratives promoted by news media during the Evros wildfires? Furthermore, this study examines the political-economic dynamics that shape the blame politics of wildfires. The analysis shows how the media failed to promote holistic coverage and highlights how the politicization of wildfires could lead to calls for action against marginalized groups such as migrants and refugees. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 provides a theoretical backdrop, explaining the theory of political ecology, the politics of blame, and the role of media in these dynamics. Section 3 outlines the methodology. Section 4 presents the main findings, focusing on the key blame narratives in the media. Section 5 examines the politics of blame in the context of two political-economic dynamics—the European refugee crisis and clientelism with the Greek media industry. Section 6 concludes the paper by discussing future research directions.

2. The political ecology of wildfire

Politics are intertwined with wildfires in multiple ways. On the one hand, wildfire policies are rarely the result of rational decision-making by experts based on scientific and technical information, but a political product influenced by competing imperatives and interests across different sectors and layers of governance, policy legacy that constraints future actions, voter preferences, and the presence of political opportunities that align relevant political interests (Hui et al., 2022). On the other hand, catastrophic events such as wildfires capture public attention and may develop into political crises with significant political consequences (Birkland, 2006; Castelló, 2024). A Spanish study found that wildfires can increase electoral support for the incumbent party but have no impact at the regional and national levels (Ramos and Sanz, 2020). Another study conducted in the US found that wildfires increased pro-environment voting (Hazlett and Mildenberger, 2020). While these studies empirically demonstrate the political impact of wildfires, they have adopted a positivist rather than a social constructionist perspective, and therefore fail to engage with the dimensions of power, particularly the discursive power struggle, of wildfires (Bednarek et al., 2022). In other words, the politicization of wildfire, that is, how wildfires and their management are used as tools for political gain or to advance certain agendas, is an underexplored topic.

To further develop the power problematics and discursive aspect of wildfire politics, we can draw on the theory of political ecology, which seeks to understand the political processes that shape environmental change and its impact on communities and ecosystems. A core idea of political ecology is to challenge the legitimacy of state-initiated environmental policies by identifying the political agenda and narratives behind certain representations of environmental disaster and degradation (Robbins, 2019; Zhu and Lo, 2022). The concept of discourse plays a

major role in political ecology. Discourse, as a representation of truth, is defined as “a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities” (Hajer, 1995; Nielsen, 2014). A discourse is therefore neither purely scientific nor purely political, but always hybrid (Arts, 2021). Discourse analysis focuses on analyzing specific texts, such as speeches, media representations, or policy documents, to uncover underlying assumptions, ideologies, and power dynamics, leading to a critical understanding of how reality is constructed by language (Liu and Lo, 2022). In political ecology, major environmental discourses, such as deforestation, desertification, biodiversity decline, and climate change, are critically analyzed in terms of their messages, narrative structures, and policy prescriptions, as well as their ability to reflect realities at the local level (Adger et al., 2001).

Political ecology seeks to reveal the political nature of forest change by questioning the existing narratives of forest degradation and deforestation (Devine and Baca, 2020). For instance, complex changes in forests and grasslands ecosystems are regarded as “degradation” driven by the “over-use of resources” by certain groups of people and thereby used as a justification for taking away their control of resources, and they may even lead to this group's removal from the environment (Wang and Lo, 2022). Focusing on the crisis narratives of illegal logging, Vasile and Iordăchescu (2022) unraveled the nature of crisis narrative as the competition for control over the forest among different actors and raised questions over what makes a degraded or changed state of nature and how it may be evaluated or defined. In this way, explanations of environmental disasters become tools for control and contribute to the marginalization of local communities (Vasile and Iordăchescu, 2022).

The politics of blame is one way of examining the political ecology of wildfires from a discursive perspective. The occurrence of wildfire and its impact are closely related to a combination of complex political-economic processes. For example, farming, logging, mining, and tourism, as well as fire management designed to sustain these activities, may directly cause wildfire or result in an alternation of forest conditions and the emergence of alternative fire regimes, such as those characterized by larger and more intense fire episodes (Andrew, 2022; Collins, 2008; Pandey et al., 2023; Papatheodorou et al., 2023). Furthermore, changes to population settlement patterns in the wildland-urban interface may enhance the socioeconomic impact of wildfires, such as increasing the number of people and assets exposed to them (Christ et al., 2023; Sarricolea et al., 2020). The distribution of such impact and vulnerability is socially unequal, and the role of marginalization drives the socioeconomically vulnerable population to live in fire-prone areas, consequently producing uneven risks of wildfires within society (Lahsen and Ribot, 2022; Thomas et al., 2022). However, such complexities are typically ignored in the politics of blame, which aim to identify a single culprit or reason for political purposes. Politicians are motivated to avoid taking the blame for disasters by adopting strategies such as scapegoating and defection (Weaver, 1986). This results in a language-based blame game that involves the discursive strategies of persuasion and the construction of narratives of cause and failure (Hansson, 2018). This blame politics may affect the public's beliefs and voting behaviors (Hazlett and Mildenberger, 2020). Blame politics is particularly notable in environmental disasters, where increasingly extreme weather events such as floods, hurricanes, heatwaves, and wildfires are now commonly acknowledged as linked to climate change (Groff, 2021; Lahsen and Ribot, 2022). However, such global-level attribution on climate change may undermine the role of local issues such as inadequate investments in fire prevention and precarious living conditions in wildfires (Lahsen and Ribot, 2022).

In addition to climate change, the literature has identified various blame targets, showing that blame politics is highly influenced by the local contexts. In the Australian context, Whittaker and Mercer (2004) discovered a discursive battle over wildfire policy between

environmentalists, who argue that wildfires are natural and inevitable, and farmers, who argue that they are a result of poor land management by the government, thus placing blame on the government and environmentalists. Similarly, Anderson et al. (2018) identified that the main blame narrative is proposed to attack environmentalists and the government over the use of prescribed burning and lack of coverage of the complexity of fire science. Environmental disasters such as wildfires become politicized when constituted through environmental discourse (Whittaker and Mercer, 2004). In Sweden, a narrative of blaming the mismanagement of logging companies emerged after the largest wildfire in the country, which may influence public attitudes toward forestry (Lidskog et al., 2019). In Brazil, blame politics following wildfires tends to develop a narrative around poor environmental decision-making, lack of disaster preparedness, and socioeconomic inequality, therefore focusing the attention on the government's deficiency and society's structural problems (Lahsen et al., 2020).

Media play a major role in the politics of blame. How they cover environmental disasters is perceived as important due to their role in shaping public opinion (Miles and Morse, 2007). Media discourse is a site where environmental realities are formulated and contested, values expressed, and practical solutions debated. In other words, media discourse is not merely a descriptive representation of reality but a constructive or performative process of it. Media articles affect the perception of wildfire status and constitute a political force for the direction of fire policies and management. Media, as the Fourth Estate, ought to provide pluralistic coverage that helps citizens understand the causes and impact of environmental disasters when extreme environmental conditions become more prominent than in the past (Boykoff, 2011; Boykoff and Boykoff, 2007; Karyotakis, 2022a). However, the media has often become less pluralistic; as in the case of wildfires, news outlets tend to invest considerable effort in interviewing political elites and presenting their views (Gutsche Jr et al., 2017; Morehouse and Sonnett, 2010). Research has shown that, during wildfires, political pressure to influence news coverage and present certain interpretations may benefit some politicians (Castelló and Montagut, 2019; Donovan et al., 2011).

3. Methods and materials

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive approach to framing theory to analyze media content. This approach “examines the keywords, metaphors, and narratives, and so on, in the context of the text as a whole” (Connolly-Ahern and Broadway, 2008). It aims to identify the central values and narratives promoted by the examined news articles and provide valuable and complex insights regarding cultural and sociopolitical meanings, as well as the context connected with the way media frame news stories (Connolly-Ahern and Broadway, 2008; Gitlin, 2003). In this way, we were able to understand and explain how news media covered and presented the events related to the Evros wildfire. The analysis of framing or frames is a standard interdisciplinary method that has been used for several decades to understand, explain, and investigate how news articles influence audiences. The way an event is covered and presented throughout news content highlights the elements that news organizations want to emphasize when building a comprehensive storyline that will be more appealing to their audiences (Karyotakis, 2022b).

Framing analysis is based on the sociological viewpoints of Goffman (1974), who sought to explain the impact of media in everyday life, and it was disseminated throughout social science disciplines to provide much-needed explanations regarding the considerable effects that media have on the public. As Entman (1993) argued, “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.” The present study follows the framing approach of Gamson (1990), who explained how media affects

collective action, arguing that social movements require news media to promote messages and influence a large proportion of the population. According to Gamson and Modigliani (1989), frames are created based on specific “symbolic devices” as part of a more comprehensive “package” that includes particular meanings and signifiers. Such “symbolic devices” may be certain visual images, depictions, exemplars, and catchphrases in news coverage that signify a particular interpretation of an event accompanied by relevant narratives (Pan and Kosicki, 1993).

Greece has a small media market and the population heavily relies on online sources for information. Newspapers have been losing readers, with many shutting down after the financial crisis of 2009 or struggling to operate. While the online space appeared to be more pluralistic, it is important to note that a few businesspeople have a powerful presence even there, impacting public trust in the media. Notably, the 2023 Reuters Institute Digital News Report highlighted that Greece had the lowest media trust among the 46 countries included in the study. A closer examination of the annual Reuters Institute Digital News Reports since 2016, when Greece was first included, reveals persistent media mistrust from the public, a heavy reliance on online sources and social media for information, and minimal willingness to pay for news.

We collected 241 news articles from 75 Greek news media sources from January 2 to 5, 2024. We performed a systematic online search through key phrases that included “Wildfire and Evros (Πυρκαγιά και Έβρος)” and “Fires and Evros (Φωτιές και Έβρος)” to identify the articles that addressed the researched event. We included the words “wildfire” and simply “fire” in Greek as Greek media interchangeably used both terms to refer to wildfire events. Then, we performed an initial analysis to identify the blame narratives. We followed up with a second round of searches using phrases based on our initial findings, including “migrants,” “government management,” “climate change,” “arson,” “arsonists,” and “foreign governments.” Duplicate news articles were not included in the sample. The collection of all the news articles through Google Search based on the abovementioned keywords was preferred in order to include all the news stories available by a number of news outlets to provide a holistic picture of the news coverage. All searches had, as a timeframe, the date on which the event started (August 19, 2023) until its end (September 6, 2023). As the Greek public is known for consuming news online more heavily than other countries, these searches may provide more diverse results regarding news sources that could cast light on different insights related to the examined topic. In establishing our selection criteria, we aimed for inclusivity and chose not to exclude any materials based on subjective evaluation. We have provided a comprehensive list of sources (73 news outlets) in the appendix. Nearly all of these sources (63 out of 73) are influential news media. Our selection also reflects diversity, encompassing local and national outlets, as well as media from both right and left political perspectives. As we included 241 news articles and used a qualitative approach, we could not present all the collected news articles in detail. Thus, we provide the best examples (exemplars) of the collected news articles of each category to illustrate the study's findings (or frames) and arguments.

4. Wildfire blame narratives

4.1. Articles without a blame narrative

From the 241 news articles, the following six frames were identified (Table 1). Some news articles (93) did not participate in blame politics as they did not identify a distinct culprit or provide explanations for the causes of the wildfires. These stories typically focused on covering the wildfire, such as a discussion about the ongoing wildfire and its potential spread, as well as practical information regarding what roads are available and can be used by citizens. For instance, one such news article titled “Fires: Egnatia Road closed - No road connection for Rodopi and Evros (Πυρκαγιές: Κλειστή η Εγνατία Οδός-Χωρίς οδική σύνδεση Ροδόπη και Έβρος)” provided information regarding what roads were available

Table 1
Key blame narratives.

Frames	No. of articles	Description
Without a blame narrative	94	Presented the incidents related to the Evros wildfires without discussion of a particular culprit.
Migrants' activities	57	Portrayed legal and illegal migrants as the culprits of the Evros wildfires, often accompanied by calls for action against them.
Government's mismanagement	37	Portrayed the Evros wildfires as a result of government mismanagement, highlighting the severe and sometimes lethal consequences.
Climate change	31	Reported the Evros wildfires as destructive events caused by climate change.
Arsonists	15	The wildfires were caused by different forms of arson.
Foreign governments	7	The incidents were framed as wildfires resulting from interference in Greece's internal affairs by foreign governments or forces.

and whether particular geographical regional units of Greece could be accessed (exemplar 1).

Exemplar 1: News report – Practical Information (News media: Naftemporiki.gr)

It is noted that all the roads connecting Alexandroupoli and Komotini are closed. As reported by the Athens-Macedonian News Agency, dozens of lorries, tourist buses, and passenger cars have been immobilized since the afternoon at both ends of the road in Mesti Rodopi, which is the last point reached by the road to Alexandroupolis.

Other news articles in this category focused on presenting images of the regions after the wildfire. One such example, titled “Fire in Evros: Heartbreaking images of the burnt areas – Shocking drone videos (Φωτιά στον Έβρο: Αποκαρδιωτικές εικόνες από τις καμμένες εκτάσεις – Συγκλονίζουν τα βίντεο drone),” included several images and videos of regions that were completely burned and of the ecological impacts (exemplar 2). Despite these depictions, no discussion was held on the causes of the wildfire or any other details. The news articles seemed to convey sorrow about what had been lost.

Exemplar 2: News report – Dreadful Depictions (News media: News247.gr)

Apocalyptic images that could be from a sci-fi movie were captured by a drone camera above the lands scorched by the devastating Evros fire that was brought under control after 16 days. An iconic reaction is that of a wild bird that, facing the scale of the destruction that took place for 16 whole days, does not recognize its place and feels complete despair in front of the burned landscape.

4.2. Migrants' activities

With regard to articles that participated in blame politics, the most popular frame portrayed migrants as the culprits of the wildfires. A total of 57 collected news articles reported arguments and narratives blaming migrants. The blame directed at refugees and migrants was initiated by right-wing politicians. The wildfires created an ideal opportunity for those political parties belonging to a more nationalistic and far-right ideology to portray the migrants with derogatory terms (e.g., “lathromenatastis”) and ensure that they were framed as illegal, so as not to be considered refugees. In that group of political actors, members of the party Greek Solution (Elliniki Lusi) were given a prominent position in the media. Greek Solution is known for its strict nationalistic agenda, which includes harsh policies against migrants and refugees. Its leader, a former ND politician, Kyriakos Velopoulos, is known for spreading conspiracy theories and using populist tactics with ultra-orthodox

tendencies (Rakopoulos, 2022).

This narrative then gained traction in the media, fueled by statements made by the Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who, in a parliamentary debate, implied that illegal migrants who were crossing the borders between Turkey and Greece had set the wildfires (exemplar 3).

Exemplar 3: News report – Prime Minister's Arguments (News media: Thetoc.gr)

Regarding arson, he [Kyriakos Mitsotakis] said that it is one of the worst actions against society—as in Evros, where it is almost certain that it is man-made. It is almost certain that it occurred on the paths of illegal immigrants. However, phenomena of self-righteousness and self-appointed sheriffs will not be tolerated by this government as this work is exclusively for the authorities, the prime minister underlined.

Some of the news articles argued that the migrants had intentionally caused the wildfires. However, these pieces accused them without providing more details and being specific. Others blamed them as culprits participating in a war against Greece with the help of their traffickers. However, some news media argued that these accusations were rooted in racist motives, the rise of fascism, and the influence of the far-right in Greek society, which has led to the spread of conspiracy theories suggesting that the wildfires were intentionally set. Almost all news outlets on the progressive and left-wing side of the spectrum (e.g., Efsyn.gr, Lifo.gr, Prin.gr) talked about a rise in the far-right and fascism. For those that were not considered a part of such a spectrum, it was not clear if they condemned these practices against the migrants.

Blaming wildfires on migrants naturally leads to a call for action against them. As reported by news media, Greek Solution parliamentarian Paris Papadakis asked the citizens of Evros on Facebook to be “ready even for war against them”. No exact details were provided regarding the identities of the migrants related to the wildfires. The depiction of migrants as illegal was based on the ideological spectrum to which the news outlet belonged: in particular, those who belonged primarily to the far-right ideological spectrum described migrants as racist and aggressive. One such case was the news article published by the tabloid news outlet Espresso titled “Evros is on fire – ‘Migrants are burning us, we will burn them too!’”, which described how citizens must hunt down the migrants causing the wildfires and threatening the lives of the local population. Migrants were portrayed as dogs and kamikaze (exemplar 4).

Exemplar 4: News report – Prime Minister's Arguments (News media: Espressonews.gr)

“The dogs will burn Alexandroupoli!” This is heard from one end of the city, with the city in danger of being caught in the crossfire by “kamikaze” illegal immigrants [“lathromenatastes” in Greek], who are now being arrested by the citizens that have taken the law into their own hands. The latest incident happened in the area behind Lidl, a few kilometers outside of Alexandroupoli, where the illegal immigrants were “arrested” by residents of the city until the police arrived!

This particular story suggests that citizens who seemingly belonged to the far-right end of the political spectrum found the opportunity to hunt down the migrants and forcefully imprison them. Some of these stories became viral throughout the news and social media, such as the one where a Greek citizen imprisoned migrants on Facebook live, calling for action against them, as the “entire mountain is full of them” and “they are about to burn us alive” (News247.gr). In this news article, these individuals accused the migrants of setting the wildfires, calling for pogroms against them as the state was unable to protect its citizens. Although their claims seemed to be supported by politicians belonging to the same political spectrum, no clear evidence showed that the arrested migrants had any connection to the accusations.

4.3. Government's mismanagement

Challenging the government's blame narrative, 37 news articles

framed the wildfires as a dreadful disaster for which the government should be blamed. Typically, they presented political statements by opposition parties going against the government's claims and accusations. These statements mainly aimed to blame the government despite Greece being known for having a long history of mismanaging summer wildfires. One such statement came from the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), Dimitris Koutsoumbas, who visited the most populated city of Evros to express his concerns about the mismanagement of the wildfire(s) (exemplar 5). Some articles in the criticism against the government and Prime Minister also criticized how ND politicians and state officials tried to shift blame onto other culprits.

Exemplar 5: News report – Political Statements (News247.gr)

The government also has important political responsibilities for not taking the necessary measures, but mainly because these days, when Greece is burning, Mr. Mitsotakis and his government, instead of wasting public money paid by the Greek people with sweat and toil and sacrifice through heavy taxation, are sending weapons systems to Zelensky...

The anti-governmental narrative also tried to showcase the heroic actions of citizens and firefighters that led to the saving of animals, other individuals, or entire villages. Meanwhile, news articles through such news narratives demonstrated a severe governmental mismanagement that forced citizens to take the government's place and save themselves. In most cases, news articles were based on citizens' social media posts. One such case, reported by several prominent news outlets, was the village of Avanta at Evros, which its citizens had saved. In the news article titled "Fire in Evros: How residents and firefighters saved Avanta (Φωτιά στον Έβρο: Πώς κάτοικοι και πυροσβέστες έσωσαν τον Αβάντα)," the news outlet reproduced a detailed social media post made by a citizen who gave details regarding the ways firefighters and citizens stopped the wildfire from burning the village (exemplar 6).

Exemplar 6: News report – Reproduction of Citizen's Social Media Post (Tanea.gr)

The battle took place behind the scenes, as shown by the cameras. "I won't tell you what I heard (...I get goosebumps). I'll tell you what I saw (...I feel pride for the first part and anger and responsibility for the second part)," he says in a post on social media. I saw a 70-year-old man covered in blood and with torn clothes, cutting down with his chainsaw a forest of 30-meter pine trees from the morning till night, non-stop, to save the village... and he saved it!

4.4. Climate change

Thirty-one of the collected news articles framed the wildfires as an outcome of climate change, making it the third most prominent culprit of the study. These articles typically described wildfires as extreme climatic events driven by extremely high temperatures and drought conditions, which make it easy for forests to catch fire. This category of articles often refers to studies and statements from scientists to establish the link between climate change and the increasing occurrence of wildfires. They also advocate for a policy narrative that emphasizes robust climate mitigation and adaptation. However, the government strongly contests this climate narrative. For example, a member of the government, Sofia Voultepsi, publicly questioned the data on wildfires provided by Greece's National Observatory, claiming that the wildfires were fewer than in past years, despite unprecedented weather conditions. After the wildfires, the Greek government removed the independence of Greece's National Observatory, making it a service of the Minister of Climate Crisis and Civil Protection. Despite the debate about the causes of the wildfires, only a few news articles dealt with the negative environmental consequences and practices that have made Greece unable to deal with such annual environmental events.

4.5. Arson

Fifteen articles disseminated the idea that wildfires were acts of systematic arson, but they were unclear about who was to be blamed as the culprits seemed to be both migrants and possibly Greek citizens. The framing of wildfires caused by arson was mainly disseminated by the government to present itself as not being responsible for the events. In probably the most prominent case, Vasilis Kikilias, the Minister of Climate Crisis and Civil Protection, said publicly in a statement that the "Greek Police will do everything possible to arrest the arsonists. You are committing a crime against the country, and you will not escape. We will find you. You will be held accountable to justice". Despite Kikilias' claims, whether arson was the leading cause of the wildfire was questionable as several alleged suspects were found not guilty. Several news media reported the paradox, with some still implying that the migrants may be the arsonists. This narrative echoed a previous narrative from the 2007 wildfire, when the government and the media described the fires as acts of terrorism and organized crime (Repousis, 2018). Furthermore, the narrative is strongly supported by the perception that arsonists are responsible for the majority of wildfires (Palaiologou et al., 2021).

4.6. Foreign governments

In this geopolitical narrative, seven collected news stories framed the wildfire as an act of war. They reported on spies and agents of foreign forces allegedly setting fire to the Greek region near the Turkish borders, enabling the Turkish army to launch an attack on Greece without encountering geographical obstacles (exemplar 7).

Exemplar 7: Opinion Article Written by a Journalist (News media: Olympia.gr)

The fires flatten the natural environment and turn the lands of our prefecture into plains visible from the satellites, which are used for the transport of war material to the front, as the target was once again ammunition depots in the village Avanta.

This narrative reflects the media's role in the long-standing geopolitical tension between Greece and Turkey. In 2020, these tensions escalated due to the European refugee crisis and Turkey's natural gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean (Ipek and Gür, 2022). This narrative is also connected to the anti-migrant rhetoric. News stories in which migrants were acting to help foreign governments and forces argued that it was clear that they caused the wildfires on purpose and that they were part of a hybrid war against Greece.

5. The political economy of wildfire blame politics

The blame politics for natural disasters, such as wildfires, is closely related to the particularities of place, and how people understand the cause of disasters is shaped by their worldviews (Lidskog et al., 2019). Consequently, the politics of blame is continually evolving across different times and places. In this section, we examine how larger political and economic forces shape the dynamics of blame.

Two political-economic dynamics are closely linked to the blame politics of wildfires in Greece. First, the targeting of migrants, a phenomenon not previously discussed in the literature, is connected to the ongoing European refugee crisis. The crisis has been characterized by polarization and an alarming negative portrayal of transnational refugees and migrants (Almustafa, 2022). In Greece, as in other European countries, national populism, xenophobic attitudes, and discontent toward the refugee and migrant policies adopted by the European Union have risen (Papatzani, 2021). This is also related to the long-lasting and historical concerns of Western nations regarding people from the East or the African continent (Kende and Krekó, 2020; Marfouk, 2019; Stivas, 2023). The xenophobic attitudes toward migrants in Europe—especially toward those from a Muslim background—fuel extreme opinions that

scapegoat the minorities to appeal to the public as a populist tactic, restricting freedoms and democratic development (Pop and Pop, 2020). The Greek media adopted the derogatory term “*lathromenatastis*” to characterize illegal migrants with a negative connotation. This word has been used indiscriminately as an umbrella term to refer to all migrants and refugees, whether illegal or legal (Rozakou, 2017). Furthermore, the ruling party, the ND, has a long-standing hostile policy against refugees that has been heavily criticized for violating human rights and international laws. ND has consistently presented refugee floods as a threat to the country (Mylonas, 2020; Rigopoulos, 2022). The blame politics surrounding the Evros wildfire, particularly the scapegoating of migrants, can only be understood within the broader context of the European refugee crisis.

The call for action against migrants and their framing as animals by some news media have also shown an alarmingly growing tolerance in Greek society, favoring practices that harm democratic principles. The anti-migrant narrative is widely accepted by the Greek public, who favors strict policies and actions against migrants (Avraamidou and Eftychiou, 2022). The constant crises Greece has experienced have increased the population's feelings of injustice and anger. Such feelings and the government's unsuccessful management raise questions about the country's societal development as, due to climate change, the country, similar to other countries, will face more extreme weather conditions that demand collaboration and trust between citizens and the state (Rovithakis et al., 2022). The role of media as the Fourth Estate is crucial in facilitating dialogue among different members of society. However, as this study shows, the country's media industry is unable to play its role in providing diverse explanations and challenging those in power.

Second, the challenging financial situation facing the Greek media industry has made news outlets more reliant on government funds. Furthermore, in the last decade, the Greek media industry has become highly concentrated, with a small number of media owners dominating both traditional and new media industries (Iosifidis and Papathanassopoulos, 2019). These media owners are known for their close clientelist connections with political parties and politicians, which allows them to interfere in news coverage and push for topics that benefit their interests (Bantimaroudis and Maniou, 2020). Notable figures include Evangelos Marinakis, who has strong connections with Kyriakos Mitsotakis, and Ivan Savvidis, who is linked to Vladimir Putin. Consequently, the media industry has become less pluralistic and more polarized. Politicians and media tycoons exert such a firm grip on the industry that they can intervene in editorial decisions and suppress content that might pose a threat to them. This situation compromises journalists' independence and professionalism and hinders the production of content that monitors and challenges political elites (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). The collected news articles included 235 direct quotes, the majority of which were statements from politicians and government officials (48.08 %). Less frequently, some stories used direct quotes from citizens and civil groups to convey public reactions to the destruction (27.66 %). In several instances, lawyers, doctors, and academics were presented as experts to make the stories more authority for the public (24.26 %). This indicates that news outlets were biased towards the government and tended to invest significant effort in interviewing political elites and presenting their arguments.

Fundamentally, the strong clientelism with the Greek media industry is a common practice present after the fall of the Greek dictatorship and the creation of the modern Greek state in 1974. Greece's governance model, like several other Mediterranean states (e.g., Spain, Portugal, and Italy) that share similar characteristics, had a weak welfare system but a powerful state. Therefore, there was a firm reliance on the governments to develop society's sectors, making individuals heavily rely on their relationships with politicians to build their businesses. That problem was also expanded in the country's media industry, making the media occasionally act as governmental representatives or supporters, knowing that such support would benefit them in the future (Hallin and

Mancini, 2004). Such behavior and the spread of clientelism have been key factors in the democratic decline, creating a negative interdependence among institutions that are supposed to check each other. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Greek government has been accused of restricting freedom of the press, which threatens the country's model of liberal democracy (Maniou, 2023; Mylonas, 2020). These political-economic dynamics have given the government a more dominant position in shaping the narrative of wildfires. As a result, the Greek media system is often characterized as an industry that does not promote balanced journalism and fails to fulfill the media's watchdog role (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2021).

6. Conclusion

Greece is known for its summer wildfires, and the causes of which are complex. Political factors, such as problematic environmental decisions and policies have increased the risk of catastrophic fire (Milonakis et al., 2021). A lack of collaboration among relevant agencies, weak law enforcement, inadequate forest management, agricultural abandonment, rural depopulation increasing fuel availability, and the expansion of wildland-urban interfaces are some of the reasons for Greece's weak performance in wildfires (Pandey et al., 2023). Moreover, climate change, high temperatures, and drought have increased the likelihood of wildfires in southern and eastern Greece (Rovithakis et al., 2022). However, the politics of blame tends to simplify or ignore these complex realities. The study has demonstrated the significant role of the news industry in fueling blame politics. It shows that a large proportion of news articles framed migrants as the possible perpetrators of wildfires and disseminated such narratives from the right-wing end of the political spectrum, including Greece's current government. The government tried to shift the blame by not taking responsibility for the wildfires and accusing other culprits, such as transnational migrants. Blaming others, especially the most vulnerable in society, is a common and simplistic strategy adopted by governments (Hansson, 2015; Karyotakis, 2022b). However, it is crucial for the government to address wildfires as a complex issue that necessitates a holistic, long-term approach. This should include fuel management, the creation of resilient landscapes, safe and efficient fire response strategies, and the development of fire-adapted communities (Essen et al., 2023).

The injustice associated with such practices perpetuates inequalities and further harms and marginalizes already vulnerable populations. The European refugee crisis has provided a convenient target of blame for the power elite. The Greek news media and journalists have failed to provide a robust explanation of wildfires, and only a few articles have challenged the government's blame narrative. This lack of diverse voices reveals the government's strong influence on news media. The Greek media are characterized by strong relations with political and business elites and extreme polarization, which have become a barrier to providing diverse coverage and thoroughly investigating the causes of a phenomenon (Papadopolou, 2020). They were also affected by the financial crisis of the 2010s, which has made them more susceptible to political and financial pressures (Skamnakis, 2018).

This study developed one aspect of the political ecology of wildfire. Looking forward, other aspects should be explored. Political ecology has a strong interest in social justice, which has not been sufficiently examined in relation to the impact of wildfires (Wang and Lo, 2021). The distribution of impact and vulnerability is socially unequal, and the role of marginalization drives the socioeconomically vulnerable population to live in fire-prone areas, consequently producing uneven risks of wildfires within society (Thomas et al., 2022). By exploring how wildfire disasters are related to preexisting fragilities and inequalities, scholars can draw attention to wildfire impact research on place-based vulnerabilities and their sociopolitical causes (Lahsen and Ribot, 2022). Scholars can highlight the need for fair and equitable strategies to address the impacts of wildfires, particularly on vulnerable and marginalized communities bearing the brunt of both the immediate

devastation and the long-term consequences of wildfires, such as displacement, health issues, and economic hardship.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Minos-Athanasios Karyotakis: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kevin Lo:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.tfp.2024.100682](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tfp.2024.100682).

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