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EUROMED Migration V Study

How did the media in European countries cover migration in 2019-2020?





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Acronyms and abbreviations

Acronyms and Abbreviations	Description
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
DG NEAR	Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
EU	European Union
EUROMED	EU-funded programme implemented by ICMPD
ICMPD	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
MAXQDA	Software programme for qualitative data analysis
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
TV	Television
UK	The United Kingdom
US	United States of America
VOX party	Right-wing party in Spain, self-identifies as nationalist.

1 Introduction

In the context of migration, the media are crucial in delivering verified information, informed opinions as well as balanced and inclusive narratives.

In the last decades, migration and circumstances surrounding it have been one of the hottest stories that drew public and media attention. This study analyses media coverage of the occurrence in several European countries¹ in the period from 2019 to 2020.

The topic of migration slipped under the radar for media on both sides of the Mediterranean during the 2019-2020 period after it had occupied much print, broadcast, online and social media space in prior years.

There are a number of reasons for this and ICMPD's EUROMED Migration V programme has identified the need to conduct a study to identify and analyse them but also various factors that affect the media migration narrative and coverage both in the European Union and Middle East and Northern Africa countries.

EUROMED Migration V is a programme funded by the European Union, steered by the Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) and implemented by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD).

This study is to an extent a follow-up of a study EUROMED Migration IV programme carried out for the same sub-regions in 2015-2016. It takes a different approach but with the same goal of developing a better understanding of the reality and constraints of traditional and other media and how these elements affect their capacity to tell the "migration story".

More specifically, this study investigates how media coverage in some European countries of migration has changed over the course of the 2019-2020 period, including the impact of social media on migration narratives, polarisation and journalism, the influence of political dynamics on the media landscape and vice-versa, and the impact of COVID-19 on migration narratives.

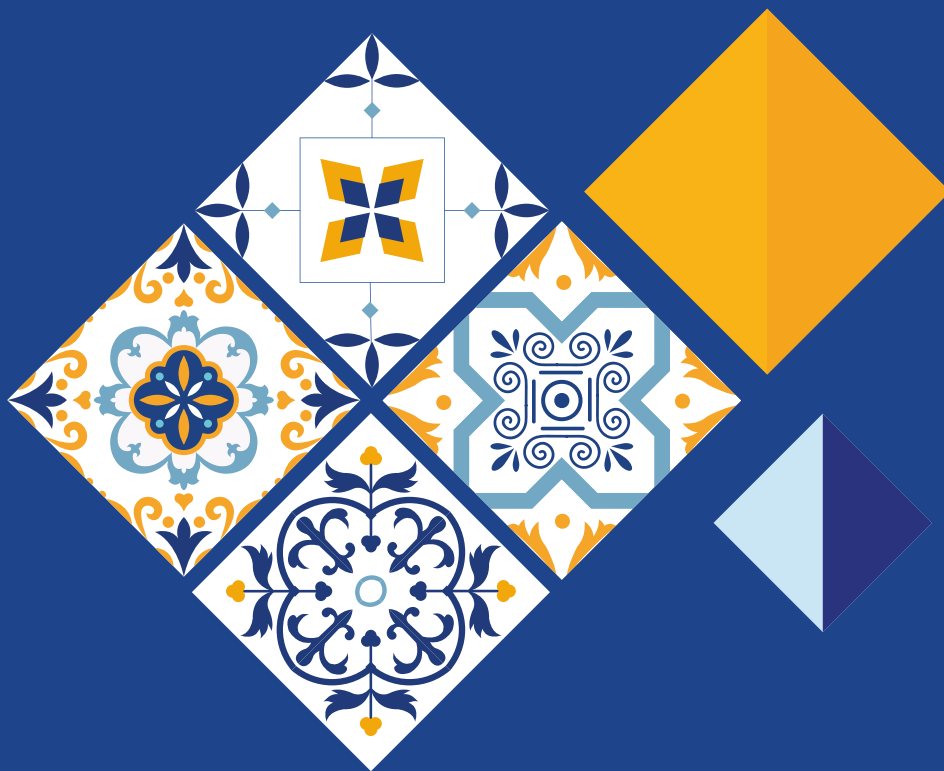
The two years selected for this study saw a decline in media interest in migration in the countries surveyed. The emergence, and spread, of the coronavirus in 2020 is an obvious reason and continues to be a news priority, as are the economic impact of the pandemic, the 10-year-old conflict in Syria, and the increased polarisation and rise of right-wing political parties and movements in Europe.

A recurring story has been the endless loop of mis- and dis-information through chat apps and social media about vaccines and their effects along with migrants' and refugees' reluctance to be vaccinated when offered the opportunity based on the false narratives they readily consumed.

This study proceeds as follows. First, the report describes the methodology used to carry out the data collection and analysis and the challenges faced. Then, the report focuses on the main findings of the fieldwork, divided into six sub-chapters:

¹ Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Malta, Spain, and Sweden

- 1) The effect of social media on media coverage of migration, including the role of social media in journalism and reporting, and the potential for polarisation and misrepresentation online;
- 2) The changes in media coverage of migration as a topic over the 2019-2020 period;
- 3) Polarisation in the media, as reflecting political and social dynamics;
- 4) The influence of politics on media coverage;
- 5) Media's attitudes towards migrants, including the dedicated organs reporting on migration, the change in language use around migrants, and journalists' attitudes towards migrants;
- 6) The impact of COVID-19 on the migration public discourse.



2 Methodology

When considering the role media play in migration debates and for migrants themselves, the complexity of the issue needs to be taken into account. Furthermore, the relevance of different aspects of migration differs between countries and different time periods. Obtaining a comprehensive picture of media and migration needs to take into account such contextual dependencies. The information is based on a questionnaire sent to journalists, academics and NGO officials as well as research drawn from news articles and reports from various migration-related organizations. It is by no means conclusive but does present a panorama of views, at times contradictory in the same country, and poses a challenge to help clarify matters for the uninitiated (including in the media) by creating much-needed awareness of an issue that is unlikely to disappear any time soon.

It is important to underline that the expert team prepared this study in 2021 and 2022 and operated under specific circumstances with a number of constraints and restrictions imposed in the vast majority of countries in the world during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For this reason, desk research and telephone or online (rather than in-person) interviews was the primary source of gathering information and data. These interviews were conducted with journalists, scholars, government officials, representatives of various organizations and other subject-matter experts according to a standard interview guideline prepared by the EUROMED Migration V team.

Seventeen interviews were conducted with journalists and experts in Austria (1), France (2), Germany (2), Greece (2), Hungary (1), Italy (1), Malta (4), Spain (3), and Sweden (1).

All interviews were conducted in English and interview summaries were analysed through MAXQDA. Interviews were coded along the themes of the interview guidelines and subsequent report structure as follows: effect of social media on reporting on migration; media polarisation; influence of media coverage on politics; influence of politics on media coverage; media's attitudes towards migrants (divided into journalists' attitudes, new media organs, language use); impact of COVID-19; and changes in media coverage of migration.

The literature consulted focused predominantly on the countries under study, looking at academic articles, journals, NGO reports, and news media articles published on the period between 2019 and 2020 in French, English and Italian. Some of the reports refer to the 2015 "migration crisis", an event that was exceptionally included in the analysis given its importance in understanding migration discourse and how the broader language around crisis.

3 Effect of Social Media on Media Coverage of Migration

The internet and social media have become important medium for many people around the world to consume information on a variety of topics, including migration. The rise in the use of these infrastructures has come with a rising public concern about the perceived and actual negative impacts these technologies have on shaping the public opinion and contributing to the dissemination of disinformation. One study conducted in 2020 showed that globally, disinformation was identified as the most important fear associated with the usage of internet and social media. The highest concerns around internet harms were registered in Europe and North America².

A deeper understanding of migration coverage by journalists is essential in a context where the industry and the profession are facing new challenges, including the relevance of disinformation and “fake news” and their reach on social media. One study looking at instances of fake news online around political events coined the term ‘empathic media’ to refer to the use of personally and emotionally targeted news produced by journalists and spread through the algorithms of social media platforms³. This section will examine how social media is considered to impact on media coverage of migration in Europe.

3.1 Social Media and Polarisation

One of the main themes emerging from the interviews conducted in relation to social media is the increased polarisation in public debates on migration. This polarisation was described as the product of “catchy” headlines, the nature of social media, the ease and speed at which unverified information spreads, and the behaviour of some users online. In Malta, one journalist⁴ interviewed highlighted that several journalists in the country became the target of organised right-wing comments to their coverage of stories and events. The journalist interviewed also referred to the problematic framing of some reporting on social media, citing that many journalists make use of “click bait” headlines to create more attention to their articles. The same journalist, mentioned that the use of shocking language for headlines was very problematic and contributes to the increasing polarisation.

According to another journalist interviewed in Malta⁵, social media has an immediate and extensive coverage, which can impact the way audiences interact with content online. In his view, the shareable format of articles and content published online can create echo chambers and cater to specific examples. At the same time, it can also give rise to antagonistic attitudes from some audiences. As mentioned when interviewed, there is more hate speech on social media than in real life. This means that media outlets have a share of the responsibility in ensuring that interactions with their content remain appropriate.

² More in (Knuutila, Neudert, & Howard, 2020).

³ One instance of “algo-journalism”, the combined impact of journalism and the reach of media articles on social media through algorithms was documented in Facebook. The newsfeed algorithm, Edgerank, later became a machine-learning algorithm that prioritises and presents content based on what users previously engaged with, what groups they belong to. More in (Bakir & McStay, 2018).

⁴ Interview_Malta_1

⁵ Interview_Malta_2



The media outlet admitted that they do not moderate their Facebook page themselves but rather leave it to the social network to moderate, through artificial intelligence and other means at their disposal. The media outlet itself only intervenes when other users submit a complaint. This aspect of moderation, and “hands off” approach, is particularly important in understanding the evolving role of media outlets, beyond reporting, in an age where social media presence is essential for new outlets’ presence and survival. One journalist in Spain⁶ mentioned that she avoids engaging with comments to articles and that many journalists lack the resources to fight hate speech online and that these platforms should be regulated and have assigned moderators to ensure that inaccurate information does not spread.

In some countries, laws and consumer behaviour seem important for the prevalence of polarising rhetoric on social media. In Austria, one journalist⁷ mentioned that there are laws on countering hate speech, making the country less tolerant for hate-fuelled discourses. Additionally, Austrians reportedly do not consume information on social media as much as some of their European or American counterparts. Similarly, in Greece, one journalist⁸ interviewed mentioned that generally, Greeks still consume most of their news through traditional (mainstream) media outlets rather than social media. Paradoxically, the same journalist emphasised that there is a low trust in mainstream media, seen as representing the views of the political elite, and higher trust in social media.

In Greece, one journalist⁹ mentioned that stories shared online that receive a lot of attention often led to vicious exchanges, including cyber bullying and accusations of lack of patriotism. This is supported by another journalist in Germany¹⁰ who mentioned that social media is a contributing factor to polarisation, as it becomes a venue for ideologies and hatred to be expressed.

Social media was also described as heightening conflict online, rather than elevating the debate. One journalist in Spain¹¹ mentioned that social media tends to foster reactive debates rather than constructive ones, which contributes to further polarisation rather than elevating public debate. Another journalist in Spain¹² highlighted that social media remains very polarised in Spain, and in his view allows for the far right to grow exponentially in the country. Following the 2019 elections, it became evident that the far right knew how to make use of emotions on social media to appeal to more voters. Another journalist¹³ in Spain mentioned that although social media is key in ensuring access to information to a wide audience, it has also become a source of toxicity.

In Sweden, one journalist¹⁴ mentioned that many right-wing websites use their online platforms to push for an anti-migrant agenda, content that eventually finds its way to social media platforms. It seems that Swedes consume a significant amount of “fake news”, compared to other EU countries. According to a 2019 study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Sweden, alongside the US and the UK is considered to have a significant usage of alternative and partisan news websites by a significant portion of the population. The study highlighted that, even though social media algorithms are less likely to promote these websites, users and supporters were still accessing them regularly¹⁵.

6 [Interview_Spain_1](#)

7 [Interview_Austria_1](#)

8 [Interview_Greece_1](#)

9 [Interview_Greece_2](#)

10 [Interview_Germany_1](#)

11 [Interview_Spain_2](#)

12 [Interview_Spain_3](#)

13 [Interview_Spain_1](#)

14 [Interview_Sweden_1](#)

15 More in (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019) .





Overall, social media is becoming more central in reaching audiences, and increasing the impact of media news articles, and to some extent amplifying some narratives more than others. This comes in a context where Europeans are increasingly consuming information online, sometimes indiscriminate of their authenticity, which can be problematic, as highlighted under the polarisation chapter.

3.2 Social media and misrepresentation

Many of the journalists interviewed highlighted the impact of social media in amplifying and increasing the visibility of some media articles more than others. One journalist in France mentioned that social media acts as a magnifying lens for different migration topics, which might appear first on mainstream social media before being picked up across and magnified by different networks.

One journalist in Malta highlighted that the way social media platforms are designed and used by media networks is meant to create wider distribution of content across networks. Speaking of the media outlet for which they work, the same journalist highlighted that Facebook was essential in ensuring that the outlet was present online and had a wider reach in Malta. Sharing articles on social media and particularly Facebook is considered essential to ensuring a wider reach and dissemination of news articles, according also to a media outlet in Malta. According to their estimates, Facebook is responsible for 60 percent of engagement with their publications and 70 percent of their revenues.

Social media have also significantly changed the dynamics of reporting. According to one journalist interviewed in Malta¹⁶ social media outlets have contributed to making some opinions more visible than others and have forced journalists to take account of the ongoing dynamics online in the reporting.

Social media and particularly Facebook are getting more attention from media outlets and journalists alike, who are increasingly engaging with the platform despite the drawbacks.

3.3 Social Media as an important tool for journalism and reporting

According to one journalist¹⁷ interviewed in Greece, social media is nowadays exceptionally important, particularly for news outlets. Given the speed at which information shared online spreads, the journalist highlighted that there were many instances where, through social media updates, journalists were alerted of developments in migrant and refugee sites, including violations of human rights and other incidents. The journalist also highlighted the role that migrant-run Facebook pages play in creating and sharing information on their situation, and putting pressure on authorities or alerting NGOs of distressed boats at sea. Posts by Greek residents were also cited as instrumental in drawing attention to and documenting what migrants and refugees in Greece face on a daily basis.



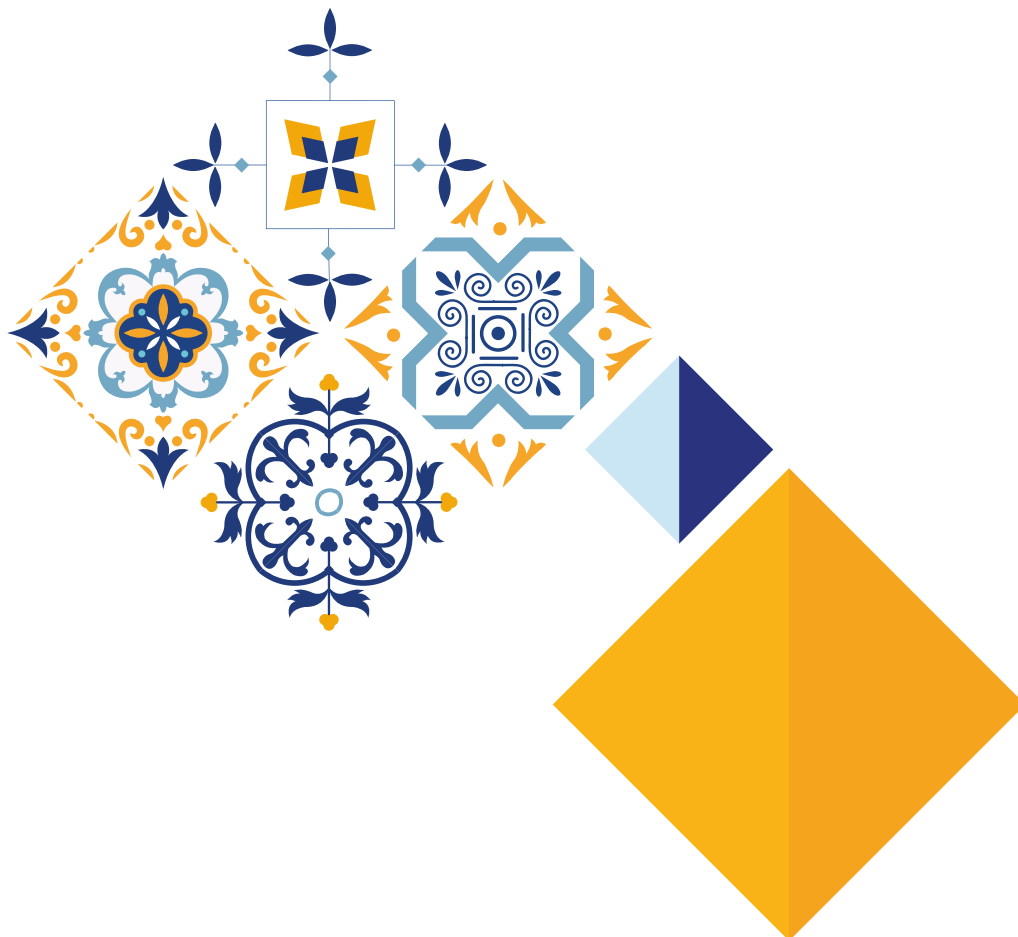
¹⁶ Interview_Malta_3

¹⁷ Interview_Greece_2

For some, social media is seen as an empowering tool for migrants, giving them a venue to express their thoughts and share their experiences, unfiltered. One journalist¹⁸ in Germany mentioned that Instagram in particular is an opportunity for migrants to have a say in the way their lives are documented and reported on. On the other hand, in other contexts, migrants' voices remain unheard or stifled. According to one journalist¹⁹ interviewed in France, social media is predominantly a platform for hate speech and migrants' voices are not represented on social media. Instead, "pseudo-experts" who have no knowledge of migration but are perceived as such are the most vocal on these channels. Their speeches are picked up by populist organisations and misused by the media and end up going viral.

In Italy, one journalist²⁰ mentioned that social media has gained more in popularity and visibility in general, to the extent where some newspapers are exclusively present on social media.

Social media is a particularly empowering tool to support migrants' story-telling. In particular, it helps bridge an important gap in instances where access to the information is limited to journalists, and where migrants are empowered to represent their own experiences rather than be mere witnesses.



18 Interview_Germany_1

19 Interview_France_1

20 Interview_Italy_1

4 Changes in Media Coverage

Media coverage of migration has changed over the course of the pandemic. Interestingly, many of the journalists interviewed drew parallels between the media coverage of migration in 2015, particularly in reference to the so-called migrant and refugee crisis, and the period covered by this report (2019-2020). Although this is less relevant for the analysis, it underlines the importance of the so-called 2015 “crisis” as a turning point in media reporting on migration.

4.1 Changes in Extent of Coverage

Coverage of migration in the media is highly linked to countries’ policies, national politics and trends of hosting migrants and dedicating coverage. In Hungary, the country has had a very strong conservative stance on migration following the so-called 2015 migration crisis. This led to migration being less often discussed in the media, a trend that continued through 2019 and 2020. One journalist²¹ interviewed mentioned that although migration as a subject is less discussed in the media, other images of violence linked with people of supposed “migrant backgrounds” are put forward in a narrative that is often inaccurate. This is particularly relevant in the pro government media, where, in her opinion, “disinformation campaigns” are launched in order to paint negative images of foreigners and build false narratives of migrants as criminals. The journalist highlighted that some of this reporting refers to incidents that took place in the US and in France and misidentifies them as having taken place in Hungary.

In Greece, migration has received varying levels of coverage over the last few years. As one journalist²² highlighted, migration was particularly salient in the media and Greek society in 2016-2017, gaining more attention than the national financial crisis. The salience decreased since then, and the angle of coverage of migration has reoriented towards the recent political dynamics between Greece and Turkey. Indeed, during the period under study, many Greek media outlets portray the migrants arriving to Greece from Turkey as economic migrants rather than refugees. This reflects a change in the way migrants arriving to Greece are perceived. They no longer need protection, as Turkey is a safe country of settlement, and those arriving are both economic migrants and “weapons” of Turkey used to destabilise Greece. This narrative is reflective of broader political dynamics in the region but marks an important transition to highlight in terms of how new arriving migrants are portrayed in the media. As one journalist²³ explained, this framing comes from the fact that Turkey is considered to be a safe country where migrants can stay, and that those attempting to cross to Greece are used by Erdogan to destabilise Greece.

In Spain, migration coverage was also affected by the changing political landscape in the country. Since the government change following the 2019 general elections, reforms took place that changed the public discourse on migration. As one journalist²⁴ highlighted, the then-new minister of migration asserted in his manifesto a more progressive and reformist agenda that the country hadn’t seen in many years, linking migration flows to labour mobility and the sustainability of the Spanish economy. However, media coverage still diverges from this progressive

²¹ Interview_Hungary_1

²² Interview_Greece_2

²³ Interview_Greece_2

²⁴ Interview_Spain_2



approach when “crisis” arise, as was the case in the Canary Islands in 2020²⁵. According to the same journalist interviewed, the debate around migration at that time was completely consumed by the events on the islands, which were further emphasised through the media. One study conducted looked at the influence of migration contexts in Southern Mediterranean countries on media framing of migration and found that, in Spain, the rapid increase in the number of arrivals to the Canary Islands brought the issue to the forefront of the media coverage²⁶.

In Germany, the overall migration and media landscape were impacted by several events, including the so-called 2015 “migration crisis” as well as other debates in the country around race that were sparked by the Black Lives Matter movement, which started the US and echoed across Europe in 2020. Protests across Europe, and notably in Germany, Italy, Denmark and Poland were recorded²⁷. One journalist²⁸ mentioned these events started a public debate in Germany around racism and migration, spanning from guest workers to a broader discussion on the integration of newcomers. The journalist mentioned that many media outlets are also giving space to migrants who have been in the country for a few years and are still learning German to be present on their channels and express themselves, something that would have been considered inconceivable a few years ago. Since the interview took place before the 2021 Federal elections in Germany, the journalist predicted that the topic of migration would be less relevant for voters, compared to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the related restrictions and vaccination campaigns.

In contrast, in Italy, the topic of migration is reportedly constantly present, with media coverage intensifying around elections and politicising the topic, making it central in electoral campaigns. In 2019, Italy went through a government crisis leading to the Prime Minister’s resignation and the appointment of a new government²⁹. As one journalist³⁰ highlighted, the language used to speak of migration has changed over the years and has increasingly become politicised. In her view, during the time period under study, the media has increasingly used sensationalist and alarmist language when reporting on migration, with one example using the “invasion” metaphor when talking about migrant arrivals. The journalist mentioned that the press makes use of this term quite often, indiscriminately referring to “200,000 people arriving” and “2,000 people coming” as invasions.

In Austria, one journalist³¹ interviewed mentioned that not much has changed in recent years in terms of reporting on migration. While the salience of the issue slightly decreased in the mainstream media because of the COVID-19 coverage, migration coverage remained present in the right-wing and conservative media outlets, pushing for populist narratives.

25 In 2020, the Canary Islands have struggled to cope with the arrival of more than 11,000 migrants by sea, which has put significant pressure on its reception facilities (Jones, 2020).

26 (Arcila-Calderón, et al., 2021)

27 (Milman, et al., 2021)

28 Interview_Germany_2

29 The Government coalition was formed by a far-right anti-migrant League party and the five-star movement, known for being an anti-establishment movement (Horowitz, 2019).

30 Interview_Italy_1

31 Interview_Austria_1



5 Polarisation in the Media

The polarisation of the reporting on migrants in the media is visible in the variety of media outlets and their respective coverage of the topics, as well as politicians' own instrumentalisation of both migration and media outlets for their own political agendas. According to one study conducted looking at the media coverage on migration in 17 countries in 2019, including both Eastern and Western European countries, there are considerable differences between media outlets in both regions but also across the political spectrum³². According to the same study, Eastern European media outlets published more than double as many articles on problems with migrants and refugees as Western European media. This was also the case for media outlets with a conservative editorial line, which tended to feature more negative reporting of migrants than liberal outlets in both eastern and western Europe. Interviews conducted in the scope of this study have shown that media polarisation is indeed reflective of the political dynamics and polarisation in the country, with more polarisation being present at the external borders of the EU and in rural areas, both in terms of attitudes and media reporting. Reporting on migrant criminality has also been at the centre of this polarisation and more generally on debates of how the media can report on crime in these instances.

5.1 Media Polarisation as a by-product of political polarisation

Polarisation in the media is often reflective of the political dynamics and the party-system landscape in different countries. In Malta, many journalists interviewed reported the extent to which polarisation in media coverage maps onto the two-party system that is characteristic of the country. One journalist³³ highlighted that the rivalry between different political parties is almost "tribal" and was described as very similar to the two-party system in the US. Journalists also emphasised how this hostility often affects their reporting and their physical safety. According to a Reporters without Borders report, many journalists in Europe are facing growing dangers, including verbal and physical attacks. More specifically, in countries like Austria, Italy and Greece, the far right has regularly attacked reporters on the ground in a growing climate hostility towards migrants³⁴.

In Hungary, one journalist interviewed mentioned that migration is often used for political purposes and migration discussions are very politicised, to the extent that, even with little migration to Hungary, compared to other countries in Europe or globally, the topic is still relatively often discussed by pro-government media outlets. Another important aspect that was mentioned in relation to polarisation in media is the language used when talking and reporting on migration. Although many independent media outlets in Hungary try to avoid the narrative used by the government, many end up reporting on migration using the same language as that used by the Prime Minister or a government official, i.e. derogatory terms when referring to migrants. The journalist interviewed mentioned that since many politicians use certain terms and framing of the issues around migration, media outlets inadvertently contribute to reinforcing this narrative and lead to further polarisation when citing and referencing these narratives in their reporting.

³² More information on the study and findings in (Fengler & Kreutler, 2020).

³³ Interview_Malta_1

³⁴ More on the Index in (RSF, 2020).

In Spain, one journalist³⁵ interviewed highlighted that polarisation has grown since the 2019 elections, with the far-right VOX party gaining in popularity. This shift is also visible across parties in Spain, with the conservative and socialist parties shifting further to the right. In France, the public discourse around migration was also influenced by the European elections and the spread of “fake news”, as one journalist³⁶ highlighted. The journalist mentioned that it was essential for journalists interviewing politicians in the media not only to be aware of the accurate numbers of asylum seekers and migrants in the country, and migrant-related crimes, but also to be able to confront politicians when they diverge from these facts.

In Austria, polarisation and politics reportedly overlap along political ideology lines. As one journalist³⁷ mentioned, identity politics is very much present in Austria with the Identitarian Movement³⁸, which contribute to the polarisation of the debate on migration in Austria. As a far-right movement, the Identitarians in Austria do their own formal press and media outlets. However, their supporters are very active on platforms online and reportedly use social media to support an anti-migrant agenda in Austria.

In Italy, the debate on migration is extremely polarised, particularly in politics. One journalist³⁹ highlighted that some politicians who are in favour of migration would rather refrain from expressing any opinion than speaking favourably of migrants, lest it negatively impact their political chances. Although the number of migrants arriving in Italy dropped drastically in 2018, there was an increase in the media coverage on the topic the following period as a result of the appointment of a new government, which set the issue high on the agenda of controversial policies. Coverage of migration in Italy touches on many linked issues including the economy, crime, national security and sovereignty, all of which contribute to polarisation⁴⁰.

In Greece, the change in government in July 2019 from a left-leaning to a right wing government brought about a change in the media coverage on migration and polarisation in the public discourse. With the centre-right New Democracy party in power, the change marks the end of the previous leftist party and its policies, including its approach to migration, which was predicted to appeal and satisfy the anti-migrant sentiments of nationalists and xenophobes⁴¹. As one journalist⁴² mentioned, there was a significant increase in negative reporting on migrants and the use of sensationalist language, such as talks of invasion when Turkey allowed migrants to cross the borders into Greece in February 2020.

Migration has had varying levels of coverage through media and political discourses in Europe, often dominating media around specific events, such as elections, and more broadly being closely linked to the political dynamics of many countries in Europe. This is supported by findings from a recent study mapping migration discourses on social media in Spain, Germany, Austria, and Sweden, highlighting that migration is a more prominent topic on political parties’ platforms, particularly in countries with a higher proportion of migrants. Interestingly, the study points that political actors from the extreme left and extreme right addressed migration more frequently and for the latter more negatively than moderate parties. This finding is particularly relevant in understanding the ongoing polarisation in the media as it maps onto broader political dynamics⁴³.

35 Interview_Spain_3

36 Interview_France_1

37 Interview_Austria_1

38 The Identitarian Movement in Austria gained in visibility in 2018-2019. The Movement itself is part of a larger pan-European movement originally inspired from a French far-right anti-migrant youth movement. (Oltermann, 2019)

39 Interview_Italy_1

40 (Pomerantsev, Applebaum, Gaston, Fusi, & Peterson, 2019)

41 The new Greek government merged the Ministry of Migration and the Ministry for Citizen Protection (Public Order), a move that was heavily criticised by Human Rights organisations as it reduces resources allocated to migration issues and downplays the importance of migration as a standalone ministerial portfolio (Lefkofridi & Chatzopoulou, 2019).

42 Interview_Greece_1

43 More on how political actors address migration on social media in (Heidenreich, Eberl, Lind, & Boomgaarden, 2020).

5.2 Polarisation as geographically localised

Polarisation in European media and attitudes is a broadly geographically and socially localised phenomenon, with wider audiences and receptiveness to polarised discourses reportedly in remote villages and towns. Polarisation in Malta also manifested differently. According to one journalist⁴⁴ interviewed, fear of migrants happens along socio-economic lines. As they explained, at the beginning of the so-called 2015 “migration crisis”, the workers’ union in Malta had a clear anti-migrant sentiment, expressed in its own media outlet. However, the discourse shifted completely, in light of the union memberships dwindling, and in light of the opportunity that migrant workers presented since 2017⁴⁵. This shift was seen in the media coverage of the union’s newspaper, where journalists reported on the plight of the migrant workers in Malta. Migrants’ presence on the island was also seen unfavourably by Maltese, particularly those of lower socio-economic backgrounds. As one journalist reported, those who belonged to lower socio-economic groups perceived migrants as a threat that drove rental costs up. Another journalist⁴⁶ interviewed in Malta mentioned that polarisation is mostly visible in smaller towns and villages on the islands and became more visible in the past two years.

Polarisation of media coverage on migrants in Spain is mostly represented through depictions of migrants as either a humanitarian issue or a threat to society. The debates revolve around migrants arriving at Spain’s external borders to the Canary Islands or Melilla and many take place on social media. According to another journalist⁴⁷ interviewed in Spain, polarisation is closely linked to the language used by media outlets when discussing migration. According to him, many of the major media outlets in Spain use sensationalism in their coverage of migration issues, and focus on tragedies, and images of people arriving on small boats and jumping across tall fences.

Polarisation of media coverage is most visible in particular contexts, where there is an audience for populist rhetoric. Findings point to secluded areas, and smaller towns and villages, as well as those of lower socio-economic backgrounds as more receptive to divisive and sensationalist discourses than others.

5.3 Polarisation and Xenophobia

In Germany, one journalist interviewed highlighted that the turning point in media polarisation when discussing migration in Germany were the incidents in Cologne that occurred on New Years’ Eve in 2015. On New Year’s Eve 2015 in Cologne, hundreds of women were reportedly mobbed and sexually assaulted by groups of young migrant men. The incidents changed the perceptions of migrants in the country and the way media outlets report on criminality in Germany⁴⁸. The media came under scrutiny for their reporting on the events and being too hesitant to disclose the citizenships of the perpetrators. One journalist⁴⁹ interviewed mentioned that following these events, reporting on migration became predominantly negative and polarised.

44 Interview_Malta_1

45 The general attitudes of unions appear to have developed considerably in recent years and there is a growing push to improve the working conditions of migrants (Debono, 2021).

46 Interview_Malta_2

47 Interview_Spain_3

48 (Bosen, 2020)

49 Interview_Germany_1



In Austria, the issue of reporting on ethnicity and migrant background when covering criminal cases came up as a contributing factor to polarisation. One journalist⁵⁰ explained that the issue of reporting on ethnicity in journalism is central in media coverage. His organisation developed a handbook advising journalists to refrain from highlighting individuals' foreign backgrounds when discussing specific cases⁵¹. The journalist mentioned experiencing a backlash from important journalists and editors in Austria, who saw this practice of abstaining from reporting on ethnicity as curbing their freedom of speech and an omission from reporting on the full facts.

Reporting on migration has changed drastically following several events in Europe, and particularly in the context of speaking about the intersection between criminality and migration, and the risk of creating and reinforcing stereotypes of particular groups of migrants as criminals.



⁵⁰ Interview_Austria_1

⁵¹ This refers to a publication titled "The Routledge Companion to Journalism Ethics" (Sarikakis & Winter, 2021).

6 Influence of Politics on Media Coverage

In many contexts, politics have a close link to the way migration is portrayed in the media. This ranges from careful monitoring and portrayal of migrants to extreme depictions of migrants as part of a wider political agenda. Instances of politically motivated censorship were registered in several countries in Europe, including the countries under study, highlighting a dangerous trend of political interference in democratic countries. In Hungary, the Prime Minister's ambitions were clearly voiced in a speech, in which he mentioned that Hungarian ownership of the media, which has increased from 34 percent to 55 percent in 2010, is expected to continue increasing⁵². This comes following an announcement of Hungary's National Media Council, which is now run exclusively by members of his political party⁵³. In Malta, in June 2020, the Broadcasting Authority, which regulates the media on the islands, instructed publicly-run Television Malta not to air journalists' questions of government officials during live press conferences⁵⁴. These instances confirm many of the concerns and practices highlighted by the journalists interviewed.

In France, one journalist⁵⁵ reported that the media has little influence on the political agenda. If anything, he mentioned that the media is lagging behind political legislation and politically driven agendas.

In Malta, the link between politics and the media is more clearly established. According to one journalist⁵⁶ interviewed, two out of the three TV stations in Malta are owned by political parties. With migrants increasingly considered as potential voters in the country, the narrative of migrants as a threat has shifted. Another journalist⁵⁷ interviewed highlighted that many political parties in Malta do have their own media houses, including TV stations, a medium with a significant following among the older generations. The media landscape in Malta has also other actors covering migration including the Catholic Church which has its own online news site and English language newspapers, which reportedly play an important role in fighting prejudice on the islands in recent years.

In Italy, the link between politics and the media is very clearly established. One journalist⁵⁸ interviewed mentioned that there are very close ties between mainstream media and Italian politics, and that the media uncritically reports what politicians say, regardless of whether the information shared is accurate.

In Hungary, similar to Italy and Malta, there is little ambiguity regarding the alignment of media narratives and political agendas. According to the journalist⁵⁹ interviewed, it is hard for independent media outlets to avoid the government-backed narrative. The journalist also mentioned that all public service media outlets are government, and except for one independent commercial TV station, according to her, most TV channels act as a government mouthpiece. In addition, the journalist's account mentioned the role of censorship in the media, with photographers being instructed to report on migration by exclusively taking pictures of male migrants and leaving women and children out of their lens. Hungarian radio is reportedly also fully aligned with the government's views, with both

52 (Tamás, 2021)

53 Ibid

54 More details in (Freedom House, 2021).

55 Interview_France_2

56 Interview_Malta_2

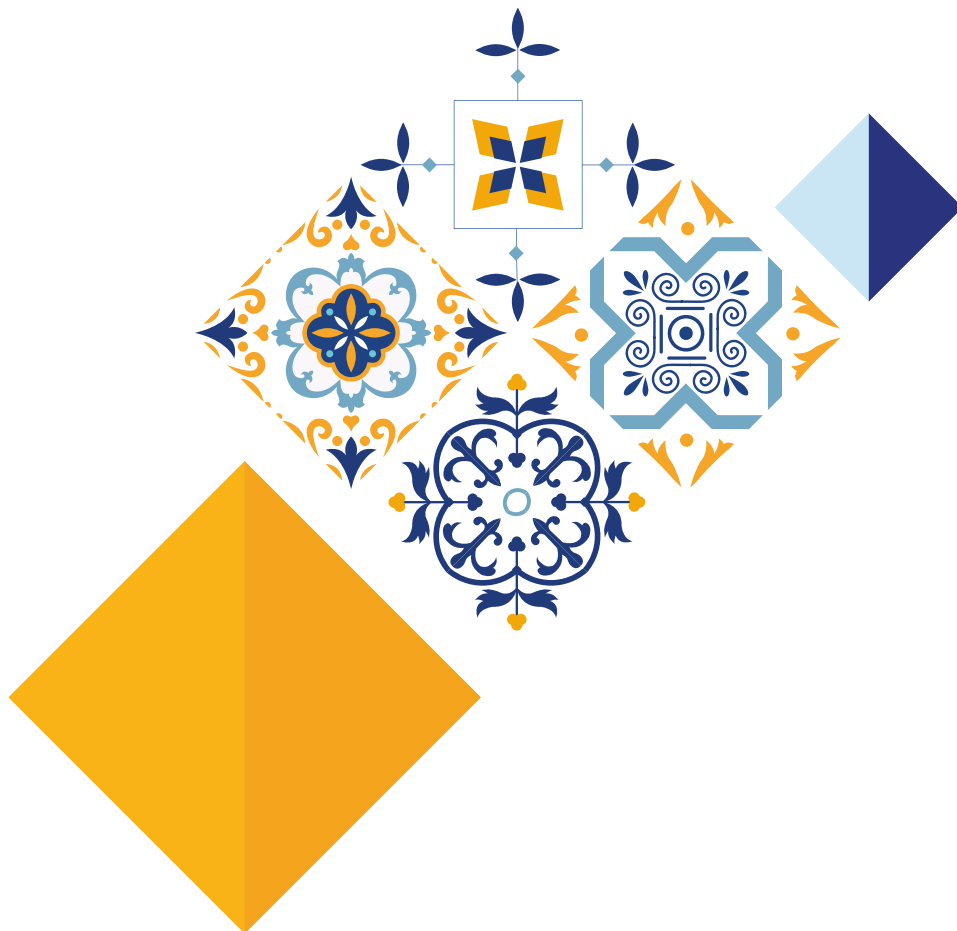
57 Interview_Malta_4

58 Interview_Italy_1

59 Interview_Hungary_1

private and public institutions reiterating government narratives. Print media follows a similar trend, with a few outliers including one daily newspaper and a few weekly ones. However, the online media outlet landscape is different, with more “dissidents” expressing differing opinions and reporting than the mainstream media in Hungary. However, as mentioned by the journalist interviewed, independent media outlets, whether online or not, have a limited reach among the public. This is further complicated by journalists facing challenges while attempting to report on topics that are in conflict with government policies. Some journalists have reportedly faced smear campaigns, some media outlets are banned from covering specific events and press conferences are held to a closed group of journalists with authorities refusing to answer requests from journalists. All of these challenges exist in a context where access to information is limited.

Media ownership is an important aspect of ensuring media freedom and its independence from private and political interferences. Most media outlets do have a clear editorial lines but the reported instances of censorship, polarisation and journalist intimidation signals a dangerous trend in many countries, particularly in light of the increased politicisation of the migration debate.





7 Media's Attitudes towards Migrants

Reporting on migration has become a contentious issue, not just because of the topic sensitivity, as it relates to political agendas, elections, and public attitudes towards migrants, but also in regards to who gets to be the storyteller. The years following the so-called 2015 "migration crisis" has seen a significant effort from media outlets, journalism schools, journalists and politicians to change the narrative by including migrant voices in their reporting and making deliberate choices in reflecting on the choice of terms used when referring to migrants.⁶⁰ This section looks more closely at how media outlets and journalists have responded to the criticism of excluding migrant voices and efforts to meaningfully empower migrant journalists in their reporting.

7.1 Media organisations dedicated to migration coverage

Following the so-called 2015 "migration crisis", there was a new need to train journalists and create new media organisations and outlets covering migration-related topics and giving voice to migrants to accurately capture their experiences. However, this approach contrasts with existing institutional setups and journalistic traditions that create little space for new narratives to emerge. This is best exemplified in France, where one journalist⁶¹ interviewed highlighted how journalism schools dictate who is represented in the media and the press and in which media outlets. As he described it, there are around 14 journalism schools in France, none of which offer migration reporting in their curricula. Many of the students graduating in their 20s go into the labour market with a naïve understanding of migration issues, often reflective of their own personal convictions as citizens rather than a critical understanding and curiosity of the subject matter, summarised by the journalist as "migrants as either heroes or threats".

One journalist⁶² in France mentioned that Guiti News, a media outlet is actively working in France to ensure migrants' representation in newsrooms. The program is meant to encourage and support migrant journalists in France to gain access and report on migration. It does so by pairing each migrant journalist with a French colleague, who they then collaborate with on stories together. This approach is meant to bring a new perspective to reporting but, as the journalist highlighted, working in pairs is not such a common practice in France. However, the journalist reported seeing an increase in migrant journalists in some newsrooms despite issues around recruitment, which showcases that media are increasingly aware of the importance of including migrants and other minorities in order to tell a fuller story. More specifically, the journalist reported that migrant journalists with foreign credentials who haven't attended one of the reputed journalism schools in France, and who do not have the network and the access to media outlets, have a harder time gaining employment in journalism.



⁶⁰ As refugees and migrant voices are reduced to pure testimony at best, which is interpreted and contextualised by journalists and editors, a meaningful response should not only address the question of who gets to tell the stories, but more importantly, what kind of stories are told. More in (Trilling, How the media contributed to the migrant crisis, 2019).

⁶¹ Interview_France_2

⁶² Interview_France_1



7.1.1 Investigative Journalism

Investigative journalism has become a challenge for many media outlets across the world. Some of these challenges are attributed to the lack of skills of some journalists, or the unavailability of specific teams dedicated to reporting on migration, but an important aspect to highlight, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, are the economic constraints⁶³. In France, according to one journalist⁶⁴ interviewed, there is very little serious investigative journalism done in the area of migration. This is due to many factors, including limited funding. Much of the investigative reporting is conducted by independent journalists or civil society actors with advocacy mandates who accompany rescue organisations at the borders and benefit from the subsequent exposure resulting from the media coverage. Another difficulty highlighted is the difficulty of accessing migrant “hotspots”, particularly in Calais. As one journalist underlined, there are growing difficulties for journalists, particularly photo journalists, in accessing migrant hotspots, including Calais, from where many migrants attempt to cross the English Channel and reach the UK. This has led to judicial cases raised against the French state, with the French Supreme Court ruling against the rights of the press to be present in such sites. The journalist highlighted that this is not unique to France, as there are instances of photo journalists being held on smuggling charges on the French and Italian borders.⁶⁵

In Italy, one journalist⁶⁶ reported that similarly to France, serious investigative journalism is conducted by freelance journalists who then sell their stories to mainstream media. There are very few instances where newspapers conduct investigations themselves.

7.2 Use of Language

Reporting on migration can be tainted with the use and misuse of particular language and terms that change the narrative on migration and the way it is presented to the public. One journalist⁶⁷ interviewed in France has highlighted how the use of particular language in a negative context can lead to some words having a pejorative connotation associated to them over time. One example is the use of the term “migrant” in French media. Because it is often used in a context of irregular or forced migration, it has come to mean something negative rather than neutral in the collective imagination. This contrasts with the reality in France, where the majority of migrants are labour migrants, a reality that is not captured in the media, according to the same journalist. The use of the term “migrant” also often refers to those of African descent who are trying to reach France through irregular means. As highlighted in the interview, French media overlooks French citizens who migrate overseas, effectively becoming “migrants” themselves. One recent example in the media that was mentioned is the General Manager of Astra Zeneca who is a French citizen, an “expat” who was praised as part of a global competition for talent, omitting the term “migrant” which use is reserved for negative representations of other (non-French) migrants.

63 More in (Karadimitriou & Ruggiero, 2020).

64 Interview_France_2

65 Two journalists, one Swiss reporter and one French reporter, were arrested in South-eastern France while covering a story on migrants entering France irregularly from Italy (RSF, 2017). Two Italian photojournalists were detained in France while reporting on a story of migrants to reach France. The photojournalists were accused of being migrant smugglers (ANSA, 2021)

66 Interview_Italy_1

67 Interview_France_2

Another term that has drawn a lot of attention and mentioned by the same journalist in France is around “exile”, or “exiled”, referring to those who are politically displaced from their country. The use of the term “*exilé*” has been growing, to capture the forced nature of migration for some in France, who are pushed into exile. The shift towards referring to exile started with charity organisations in France, which push against using the term “migrants” as an umbrella term, and “*clandestin*” which is used by right-wing parties. The use of the term “*réfugié*” is less encouraged as it is seen as a legal status conferred by authorities, which does not yet apply to asylum seekers⁶⁸. Reportedly, this term is increasingly used when talking about migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea and arriving to Europe, and is associated with a neutral or positive image of migrants, who are extended support and compassion. The journalist interviewed contrasted the use of the term “migrant” which fuels negative discourses, and exile which has tends towards a more positive association and confers some agency to those for whom the term applies.

As languages have their own particularities, it is important to highlight that some terms are specific to each. In Greek for example, one journalist highlighted that how the term “*Lathrometanastis*” was widely used by the media in reference to migrants arriving to Greece. The term itself means clandestine or “illegal” migrant but has a widely pejorative connotation.⁶⁹ This term has eventually shifted among politicians to be replaced with “*prosfyghas*” (refugee), thus stressing the forced element in these people’s movements⁷⁰.

In Sweden, the language around migration has revolved around unaccompanied minors and criminality. As one journalist⁷¹ mentioned, there was a big discussion of whether the unaccompanied minors arriving to Sweden were indeed genuine minors or posing as such and the media fed into this tension in public debates. This is particularly relevant for unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan, where the analysis of articles of two of Sweden’s leading newspapers shows that media coverage of unaccompanied Afghan minors is often negative and conflict-centered, with minors framed as liars or criminals⁷². Another important debate in Sweden is reporting on criminality and migrants’ involvement, particularly as it related to criminality in migrant-dense suburbs. These instances have become even more topical in light of a recently popular book in Sweden. As highlighted by the journalist interviewed, one of Sweden’s bestsellers is a book titled “*Familjen*” (The Family), which was nominated for the August Award of 2020. The author is an award-winning journalist who followed a family living in Angered, one of Gothenburg’s migrant-dense suburbs, and deals with criminal clan structures among families of migrant backgrounds. In this context, the use of the term “clan” to refer to the criminal structures of these families was described by the journalist interviewed as problematic and deemed to be racist.⁷³

In Malta, the use of the term “*Klandestini*” to refer to irregular migrants is not widely used in the media, nor are terms like “illegal migrants” in English speaking outlets, as one journalist⁷⁴ interviewed highlighted.

In Italy, the use of sensational language to describe migrant movements (e.g. “invasion”) is clearly visible in media outlets, as one journalist⁷⁵ confirmed. However, one interesting approach that was adopted by media outlets during the pandemic was to compare the situation of migrants arriving to Italy and Italians in full lockdown through the use of the word “while”. As one journalist reported, one narrative mentioned was this idea that migrants arriving by boats were allowed to disembark “while” Italians are locked in their homes, or migrants are being provided with

68 More on the distinctions between the different terms and their use in (Leprince, 2020).

69 The term is described as a neologism, having deeply discriminatory overtones and is associated with negative images of irregularity and criminality (Konstantinidou & Michailidou, 2014)

70 In public discourse, government officials eventually replaced the pejorative term for “illegal immigrant” with refugee when referring to the Syrian displacement but also more broadly to infer a positive meaning on the status of refugee in Greece (Rozakou, 2017).

71 Interview_Sweden_1

72 The study shows that this problematic framing of unaccompanied migrants in Sweden can further reinforce stereotypes, affect public opinion and influence political decisions of these groups. More in (Lennartsson, 2019).

73 The term clan is problematized by many scholars and media outlets alike, not only in Sweden but also in Germany where similar narratives exist when referring to organised crime among migrants of Middle Eastern backgrounds (Lundberg, 2020).

74 Interview_Malta_3

75 Interview_Italy_1



shelter and food “while” Italians are losing their jobs. This rhetorical approach then explicitly compared the two groups and could be considered as contributing to a more negative view of newly arrived migrants. The use of racial slurs towards dark-skinned people in Italy is not uncommon in the Italian press, as the same journalist mentioned. However, during the period under study, a debate around racism was opened in Italy in connection to the BLM Movement. This was documented in a study looking at Black Lives Matter in some countries in Europe, including interviews conducted in Italy and Germany and critical discourse analysis of media outlets.⁷⁶ The articles examined differed in their approach, but broadly framed the movement, protests and subsequent public debates around denouncing racism as a problem in Italy. However, articles published in La Repubblica had often implicit or explicit references to racism as a different problem that takes less pronounced forms compared to the US and is easier to solve. The use of racial slurs also extended to Asian communities in Italy during the pandemic, as documented by a paper investigating Italian media discourses. The paper finds that there are deep-rooted colonialist and problematic assumptions about what was referred to as “Asian”, “oriental”, “Chinese” and “yellow”⁷⁷.

Language use is critical in representing migrants in the media. The journalists interviewed highlighted the importance of using specific terms that do not engage with the “legality” of migrants, and many of the ongoing debates in European countries forced national conversations on the terms used, both colloquially and in the media when talking about migrants, or those of migrant background.

7.3 Journalists’ attitudes towards migrants

The changing media landscape in several countries has changed how different outlets report on migration. In France for example, one journalist⁷⁸ highlighted that over the last 10 years, the TV licenses granted went from six to 27, reflecting a wider range of editorial lines and business ownership. As a result, reporting on migration in TV stations takes a more “hysterical” coverage approach, which was described by the journalist interviewed as different from the more balanced debate in the major newspapers. Another important change highlighted in the way journalists have covered migration in newspapers was mentioned by the same journalist. According to him, in the past, some reporters working for newspapers such as Le Parisien, or Libération had a deeper understanding of migration related topics and a more extensive knowledge of the historical dimensions in France. Currently, many of the journalists working for the main French news outlets such as Le Monde, Libération or le Figaro have been covering migration for less than two years and were described by the journalist interviewed as very competent but lacking the historic dimension and perspective on the topic.

The lack of positive reporting on migrants is a contributing factor in creating exclusively negative images of migrants. One journalist⁷⁹ interviewed in Greece mentioned that unlike Der Spiegel in Germany, which occasionally covers success stories of migrants integrating in Germany, Greek media rarely extends such coverage to migrants in Greece. Except for perhaps one or two instances of football players of migrant background, the journalist mentioned that Greek newspapers rarely paint migrants in a positive light.

Journalists attitudes towards migrants vary greatly across contexts, resulting in a differing focus and coverage of migration as a topic.

⁷⁶ The study looked specifically at La Repubblica, the most widely read newspaper in Italy, and Il Manifesto, the only left-wing daily newspaper in the country, during the timeframe of June 2020 (Milman, et al., 2021).

⁷⁷ The use of these problematic depictions precedes the pandemic lockdown in Italy, as demonstrated in one satirical cartoon in la Repubblica, one of the most influential newspapers in Italy, dated 30 January 2020. More in (Miyake, 2021).

⁷⁸ Interview_France_2

⁷⁹ Interview_Greece_2





8 The impact of COVID-19 on Migration Narratives in the Media

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted migrants on the move, in reception facilities, and countries of residence at varying degrees. The beginning of the pandemic was also marked by restrictions on mobility and increased border controls, including border closures, all of which influenced reporting on migration and on migrants.

The following chapter looks closely at how the media reported on migrants during the pandemic in several European countries. More specifically, this chapter addresses the media coverage of migrants on the move, as some were seen as “deliberate” carriers of the COVID-19 virus. Several right-wing nationalist governments rushed to find scapegoats for the outbreak of COVID-19. In Italy, Matteo Salvini criticised the government for allowing a boat carrying migrants from Africa to be rescued and disembark in Sicily. Greece’s nationalist government cited the risk of infection as a reason to build closed camps for asylum seekers. Le Pen used the spread of the virus to urge for the closure of France’s border with Italy⁸⁰. The media coverage also highlighted some positive aspects of migration, particularly as essential workers in the economic and healthcare sectors, where the positive contributions of migrants were praised.

The pandemic also shaped to a significant extent the political and public discourse around migration in several countries, some of which was covered by the respective media channels. The public discourse ranged from migrants as particularly vulnerable to the pandemic, capturing the sympathy of the general public, media and politicians alike, to an increase use of warfare language when discussing COVID-19 and migration.

8.1 Narratives related to migrant arrivals and border control

The media coverage of migrant arrivals by sea to countries at the southern borders of the EU changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is highlighted by journalists in Malta, Italy, Greece, and Spain, where mobility restrictions imposed on those residing in these countries, particularly own nationals, impacted on their reporting on and perceptions of migrants arriving to Europe. Countries further inland such as Austria and Hungary also reported on sea arrivals and migrants as “carriers of the virus”.

In Malta, according to one journalist⁸¹ interviewed, there were varying accounts of migrants arriving to the island and being carriers of the virus. This referred specifically to migrants arriving by boat, at a time were borders were closed and flights were scarce.

In Greece, the media reported on the perceptions of migrants arriving through the Turkish-Greek border at the beginning of the pandemic. One journalist⁸² interviewed reported that some media outlets highlighted that migrants



80 More on stories spread by nationalist parties of migrants carrying and spreading the virus in (Trilling, Migrants aren't spreading coronavirus – but nationalists are blaming them anyway, 2020)

81 Interview_Malta_1



were being sent to the Greek border from Turkey and that they were carrying the virus. In light of the tensions between Greece and Turkey, narratives of migrants as “weapons” used by Turkey were not uncommon in the political discourse and the Greek media. In some instances, journalists reported a systematic “othering” of migrants, as carriers of diseases in addition to COVID-19, as highlighted in an interview. As one journalist in Greece interviewed highlighted, the coverage of the pandemic at the start of the lockdowns emphasised the “unknown” identities of these migrants and the diseases they might be bringing, including COVID-19.⁸³

In Spain, similar narratives of “irregular” migrants as carrying the virus emerged at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak. However, this narrative slowly disappeared when the tourism sector in the country reopened and tourists from Germany, France and elsewhere became the new “carriers” of the virus, which broke the association the media created with the virus and migrants from the global South. Similar media coverage was present in Germany, where the blame for the spread of the virus shifted from migrants, to those going on holidays in Spain, or India, and not respecting the measures put in place to contain the spread of the virus.

In Austria, one journalist⁸⁴ interviewed described the media approach to migrants as differentiated depending on their location. The media narratives in Austria reporting on migrants in Greece were those of empathy and compassion to the living conditions they endure. Austrian media reported on the subpar living conditions in refugee sites in Greece, particularly on the Greek Islands, citing the government decision to withdraw housing support to recognised asylum seekers, which would go into effect during the winter, exposing many to homelessness.⁸⁵ However, there were rumours of migrants wanting to carry on their journey to Austria, and this movement was seen as synonymous to migrants bringing the virus to the country.

In Hungary, narratives of migrants already present in the country as a health hazard were present in both the media and public discourse. As one journalist⁸⁶ interviewed highlighted it, there was considerable misinformation circulating in relation to COVID-19, one of which being that migrants were carriers of the virus. At the beginning of the pandemic, Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán blamed migrants in the country and migration for the appearance and spread of the virus in Hungary. Among the first infections detected in Hungary, some were of Iranian students residing in the country. Their infection resulted in their expulsion and vilification of migrants as carriers of the virus. Prime Minister Orbán announced that Hungary was leading a “two-front war, one called migration, and the other one belongs to the coronavirus, there is a logical connection between the two, as both spread with movement”⁸⁷. As the health crisis intensified, this narrative slowly decreased and the focus shifted to the state of emergency imposed and the reporting on cases and the spread of virus in the country.

Narratives on migrants’ movements during the COVID-19 pandemic have differed between countries at the external borders of the EU and those that are further inland. These narratives ranged from migrants as carriers of the virus or political weapons, to migrants as particularly vulnerable. While the focus of these narratives was on migrants from the “global South”, some of these discourses were dispelled in light of tourists from the Global North being carriers of the virus as well.

82 Interview_Greece_2

83 This “othering” of migrants precedes the COVID-19 pandemic, and was most visible in the reporting on the so-called 2015 “Migration crisis” at the external borders of the EU, reporting that was described as “disaster reporting setting ideas about people from “over there” (Trilling, How the media contributed to the migrant crisis, 2019).

84 Interview_Austria_1

85 (ORF, 2020)

86 Interview_Hungary_1

87 More on the manufactured association of migrants and the spread of COVID-19 in Hungary at the beginning of the pandemic in (Newswires, 2020)



8.2 Impact of COVID-19 restrictions on reporting

The measures and restrictions imposed at the beginning of the pandemic affected reporting on migration because of the difficulties journalists (and even first line practitioners) faced in accessing migrants in reception centres as well as in other settings, reporting on their living conditions and the ways the pandemic impacted their lives. As one journalist⁸⁸ in Spain interviewed described it, there was a disconnect between their reporting and the outside world as a result of the restrictions imposed on residents in Spain at the beginning of the pandemic. In France, one journalist⁸⁹ interviewed insinuated that the COVID-19 restrictions were used to purposely prevent media access to migrant hotspots. This approach meant that it became harder for migration issues to be featured in the media, which impacted the salience of migration-related issues and incidents in the media and therefore also public discourse.

Moreover, One journalist⁹⁰ interviewed in Spain also reported that access to politicians and authorities became limited. From their perspective, this meant that they could not be held accountable by the press. She suggested that the pandemic was used as an excuse for inaction when dealing with migrants and migration issues, and a justification for harsher policies and contested measures. One example mentioned was in the Canary Islands, where migrants arriving to the islands irregularly were poorly received, and further complicated the management of the “crisis”.

The lack of access to migrants and information on their experiences was also highlighted by German journalists as opening the door for misrepresentations of migrants in the media. One journalist⁹¹ interviewed mentioned that it was challenging to report on the extent to which migrants were affected by the pandemic, in particular as related to their housing or employment situations as such data is not made available. This meant that public debates on migrants and COVID-19 were ideological rather than factual.

Following the ease of pandemic-related restrictions, limitations on access to migrants remained in place in some contexts. In Greece, one journalist⁹² interviewed reported that accessing refugee sites was not possible and that several checkpoints were temporarily put in place to control access to these sites. Access was selectively granted to the state news agency and denied to foreign outlets. Instead, journalists received photos, videos and other material from refugees in different refugee sites. Journalists had to rely on twitter feeds from those present inside the refugee sites to report on the pandemic and the refugees’ situation.

COVID-19 has imposed new restrictions on journalists and their ability to cover stories and report on migrants and their situations. Migrants in reception centres were completely isolated from the external world, a move that was used tactically by some governments to control the narrative.

88 Interview_Spain_1

89 Interview_France_2

90 Interview_Spain_1

91 Interview_Germany_1

92 Interview_Greece_1

8.3 COVID-19 and Positive reporting on Migration

The media coverage during the pandemic also included positive messaging and reporting on migrants in light of the restrictions imposed. These mostly highlighted the contributions of migrants to essential sectors, such as retail, transportation, healthcare and agriculture in France, Sweden, Spain, and Germany. The few instances of positive reporting on migrants in Germany revolve around migrant healthcare workers in the public healthcare system. Similarly, in Spain, one journalist⁹³ interviewed reported that there was an overall sympathetic approach to speaking about migrants, as there was a bigger recognition of their role in hospitals and other essential sectors. Positive representations of migrants in the media during the pandemic highlighted their contributions to several sectors including the essential workers in agriculture, delivery and shipping, transportation and essential shop employees such as supermarkets. The Swedish media has also highlighted the percentage of migrants working in the Swedish healthcare systems, with an emphasis on the contributions of migrants, working as auxiliary nurses or in care homes.⁹⁴ In France, one journalist⁹⁵ interviewed highlighted that media emphasised the contributions of migrant healthcare workers to the efforts to fighting the virus and ensuring the healthcare systems remain functional. In the context of the border closures France imposed⁹⁶, healthcare workers from Morocco, Spain and other countries were framed as heroes by the French press. However, as highlighted in the same interview and above, the media coverage at that time shed very little light on the working conditions and the precariousness experienced by the healthcare workers.

The Spanish media also covered the discourse on regularisation of irregular migrants in Portugal and Italy to ensure their access to healthcare services and their employment in agriculture, a sector that was affected by the closure of borders and seasonal labour shortages.

The role of images and visual reporting was also highlighted as impactful in shifting the narrative around migrants during the first year of the pandemic. In Spain, one journalist⁹⁷ interviewed mentioned that images of African and Arab migrants working in the fields in rural images in Spain was seen as a positive initiative, not only from an agricultural and food security perspective, but also for the local rural communities, particularly in villages with decreasing and ageing populations.

The media coverage of migrants during the pandemic was not all negative, as some highlighted the important contributions of migrants during this time of crisis. This new discourse has shifted some of the coverage and public opinion to seeing migrants under a different light and the media portraying some as “heroes”.

93 Interview_Spain_3

94 In Sweden, 34 percent of all practicing doctors and 12 percent of nurses are immigrants. In addition, 26 percent of assistant nurses or personal care workers are migrants, according to Statistics Sweden in March 2020 (Pelling, 2020).

95 Interview_France_1

96 France and several EU countries went into a full lockdown at the beginning of the pandemic, to limit the spread of the virus. This included a ban on foreigners travelling to the country. Healthcare workers, including those of migrant background, were essential in supporting the country's efforts (Henley & Kassam, 2020).

97 Interview_Spain_3

8.4 Impact of COVID-19 on the migration public discourse

The pandemic had varying impacts on the way migration issues were dealt with, and the issues that became more salient as a result of the restrictions imposed and the health consequences it had. As highlighted in earlier sections, restrictions on movement and access to migrant reception centres led to limited reporting, but certain events in some countries really turned this around and brought migrant issues to the fore. Journalists and migrant organisations highlighted how migrants were highly exposed to COVID-19 and were more affected by the impacts it had. Although they face similar health threats as host communities, migrants can face limited employment options, poor and unsafe working and housing conditions, and limited access to health services, all of which have disproportionate effects on migrants.⁹⁸

One instance of this is the way the Spanish media spoke about migrants and their vulnerability in light of the pandemic. According to one journalist⁹⁹ in Spain, the pandemic shed some light on the vulnerabilities experienced by migrants, which were further deepened during the beginning of the pandemic. Both left and right-leaning media Spanish outlets covered the health and economic impacts of the pandemic on migrants, including those in irregular situations. Some media outlets covered the economic contributions of migrants through taxes, despite their dire situations. One journalist¹⁰⁰ in Spain mentioned that across the political spectrum and media landscape, there was a broad consensus that migrants, including those undocumented, should be included in vaccination campaigns.

In Sweden, a similar trend was highlighted by a journalist¹⁰¹ interviewed, whereby migrants' vulnerabilities were at the forefront of the discussion on migration. He mentioned that before the pandemic the discussion around migration in Swedish media revolved around crime. However, the coverage of migrant-related crime significantly decreased during the pandemic. Instead, the discussion shifted to the effects of COVID-19 on migrants, who were reportedly much more affected with the pandemic and measures imposed than Swedes.

In France, the pandemic also revealed the vulnerabilities experienced by migrants in France. One journalist¹⁰² interviewed highlighted an instance where migrants were evicted and could not have access to a shelter and occupied the Place de la République in tents before they were dismantled by the police. This particular incident was heavily covered by the media and impacted public French opinion regarding the issue of migrants' access to accommodation. One journalist interviewed referred to it as a turning point in shedding the light on vulnerabilities experienced by migrants.

In Austria, the focus of the media at the beginning of the pandemic was mostly on the overall cases in the country and hospital capacities. As a result, migration was considerably less covered as a topic. There was also very little thorough reporting about whether migrant communities were having access to testing or vaccination at that time.

⁹⁸ More on the barriers migrants faced in accessing services during COVID-19, including asylum seekers, undocumented and irregular migrants in (Hoagland, 2020).

⁹⁹ Interview_Spain_1

¹⁰⁰ Interview_Spain_2

¹⁰¹ Interview_Sweden_1

¹⁰² Interview_France_1



In Italy, the political discourse around migrants shifted in the second phase of the pandemic once the country started recovering from the initial pressure of high numbers of infections. One journalist¹⁰³ interviewed mentioned that, once there were fewer people getting sick and fewer deaths, the topic of migration became more salient. The same journalist highlighted that a similar language of warfare was used when discussing COVID-19 and migration. Terms such as “war”, “frontline”, “trenches”, and other war metaphors were present in politicians’ speeches as well as media outlets. President Macron mentioned that France was “at war” six times in his address to the Nation. War metaphors to describe the pandemic also invaded journalistic discourses and political speeches in Italy.¹⁰⁴ In addition, what can be seen as polarising comparisons were made, where the media highlighted that migrants arriving by boat were allowed to disembark on Italian territory while Italians were locked up in their homes, and that migrants were receiving shelter and food while many Italians were losing their jobs. The same journalist¹⁰⁵ also reported that media outlets in Italy ran stories of infected migrants coming towards Italy, which further amplifies the “weaponisation” of migrants’ narratives. The “weaponisation” term is used in a wider context of the militarization of borders. In the context of the Greek-Turkish border, the concentration of 13,000 people in Kastanies, Evros in February/March 2020 was confronted violently (by both sides) with widespread use of chemicals, two killings and illegal pushbacks. During this time, refugees were defined in domestic Greek media as the “national enemy”, “Erdogan’s tool, weapon”, and border protection was equated with deterrence and pushbacks¹⁰⁶.

Overall, the pandemic was described as a factor that further complicates the discourse on migration. One journalist in Spain mentioned that migration overall was less salient as a standalone issue at the beginning of the pandemic and that it was only discussed in news outlets in connection to the pandemic.



¹⁰³ Interview_Italy_1

¹⁰⁴ The metaphorical presentation of COVID-19 as a war influences how citizens perceive the health crisis, and the restrictions imposed on civil liberties and mobility as explained in (Panzeri, Di Paola, & Domaneschi, 2021).

¹⁰⁵ Interview_Italy_1

¹⁰⁶ Similar to the so-called 2015 “migration crisis” and how it was used to legitimize greater border protection, the February 2020 crisis at the Greek border justified the reinforcement of border controls and their “militarization”. (Kouniaki, 2021).

9 Conclusions



This study looks at the ways in which media across Europe reported on migration and narratives around migrants during the 2019-2020 period. More specifically, narratives on migration in media in Austria, Hungary, Italy, France, Germany, Greece, Malta, Spain, and Sweden, have captured the different changes witnessed during this period. The internet and social media have become important medium for many people around the world to consume information on a variety of topics, including migration. The rise of the use of these infrastructures has come with a rising public concern about the perceived and actual negative impacts these technologies have on shaping the public opinion and contributing to the dissemination of disinformation.

Overall, social media is becoming more central in reaching audiences, and increasing the impact of media news articles, and to some extent amplifying some narratives more than others. This comes in a context where Europeans are increasingly consuming information online, sometimes indiscriminate of their authenticity, which can be problematic. However, social media is a particularly empowering tool to support migrants' story-telling. In particular, it helps bridge an important gap in instances where access to the information is limited to journalists, and where migrants are empowered to represent their own experiences rather than be mere witnesses.

The polarisation of the reporting on migrants in the media is visible in the variety of media outlets and their respective coverage of the topics, as well as politicians' own instrumentalisation of both migration and media outlets for their own political agendas. Reporting on migrant criminality has also been at the centre of this polarisation and more generally on debates of how the media can report on crime in these instances. Polarisation of media coverage is most visible in particular contexts, where there is an audience for populist rhetoric. Findings point to secluded areas, and smaller towns and villages, as well as those of lower socio-economic backgrounds as more receptive to divisive and sensationalist discourses than others.

In many contexts, politics have a close link to the way migration is portrayed in the media. This ranges from careful monitoring and portrayal of migrants to extreme depictions of migrants as part of a wider political agenda. Instances of politically motivated censorship were registered in several countries in Europe, including the countries under study, highlighting a dangerous trend of political interference.

Reporting on migration is a contentious issue, not just because of the topic sensitivity, as it relates to political agendas, elections, and public attitudes towards migrants, but also in regards to who gets to be the storyteller. The years following the so-called 2015 "migration crisis" has seen a significant effort from media outlets, journalism schools, journalists and politicians to change the narrative by including migrant voices in their reporting and making deliberate choices in reflecting on the choice of terms used when referring to migrants.

Narratives on migrants' movements during the COVID-19 pandemic have differed between countries at the external borders of the EU and those that are further inland. These narratives ranged from migrants as carriers of the virus or political weapons, to migrants as particularly vulnerable. While the focus of these narratives was on migrants from the "global South", some of these discourses were dispelled in light of tourists from the Global North being carriers of the virus as well.

2019-2020 were years of great change for Europe, and impacted the way media reported on many aspects, including migration. It is clear that the events of these years will reverberate for many years, and will likely be visible through media reporting on migration.

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11 Annexes



11.1 Annex 1: Interview Schedule

Country	Total number of interviews
Austria	1
France	2
Germany	2
Greece	2
Hungary	1
Italy	1
Malta	4
Spain	3
Sweden	1

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