



REMINDER

ROLE OF EUROPEAN MOBILITY AND ITS IMPACTS
IN NARRATIVES, DEBATES AND EU REFORMS

Reporting on Migration and Mobility: Recommendations for Practitioners

REPORT

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Reporting on Migration and Mobility:

Recommendations for Practitioners

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Executive Summary

A central aim of the REMINDER project has been to investigate how media in the European Union deal with migration and mobility. Work Package 8 (WP 8), in particular, looks at media coverage itself, investigating salience, sentiment and framing of migration-related news coverage in seven countries across Europe, using quantitative and computational methods of text analysis. Parallel to this, Work Package 11 (WP 11) conducted qualitative research based on focus group sessions and individual interviews with journalists in nine member states in 2017, exploring newsroom practices in general and migration and mobility reporting in particular.

This deliverable combines findings from both work packages concerning media coverage and journalistic attitudes and practices in Spain, the United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, Poland, Hungary and Romania. Based on these findings it formulates recommendations regarding migration reporting for practitioners. Because of major differences between journalistic practices in the old and new democracies of the European Union, these two groups of countries are discussed separately.



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Similarities and differences across the nine countries

This paper is based on three previous documents from the REMINDER project, the reports “European Media Migration Report” (Eberl et al., 2019), “Media practices related to migration and intra-EU mobility in the EU-15 Member States” (Karstens, Kuznik, & McNeil, 2018) and “Media practices related to migration and intra-EU mobility in the EU-10 Member States” (Bajomi-Lázár, 2018).¹ These papers made use of two particular analytical approaches, computer-assisted text analysis on the one side and focus group and individual interviews on the other. The computer-assisted text analysis was based on up to 844,000 migration-related news articles in seven languages and up to 37 different European news outlets between 2003 and 2017. The focus group sessions and individual interviews were conducted with journalists in 2017 in Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.² Both approaches revealed that migration from beyond the European Union, and mobility between its member states, are salient issues that news media cover with some regularity. At the same time, however, the extent and type of coverage varies across the countries studied, most likely due to varying political and migration-related context differences. Most importantly, the Western European member states included in the sample are mainly destination countries for people on the move (both from within and outside the EU), whereas the Eastern European ones are mainly source and transit countries of migration movements. Spain was a “country of immigration” until around 2010 (Cebolla-Boado & Gonzalés, 2013); however in later years it saw increasingly high levels of emigration. Because of differences in their positions with regard to migration and mobility, the old democracies of Western Europe and the young ones of Eastern Europe will be discussed separately.

When interpreting the empirical findings summarized below and reviewing the recommendations we have formulated, certain contrasting aspects of the countries need to

¹ Note that, in addition to these, Robert McNeil and Eric Karstens of Work Package 11 have also compiled a report covering both Western and Eastern member states, under the title “Comparative Report on Cross-country Media Practices, Migration, and Mobility” (McNeil & Karstens, 2018), which details many of the issues briefly addressed in this paper. For the methodology, see the introductory parts of the papers above.

² Note that, in addition to these, WP11 has also looked at Italy and Slovenia. However, since these were not part of the media analysis of WP8, findings and recommendations for these countries are not a part of this deliverable.



be taken into account. On the one hand, the Western European countries studied are without exception consolidated democracies with robust media markets and relatively high levels of media freedom. On the other hand, many of the Eastern European ones evince a democratic deficit, weak media markets (Poland being an exception), and comparatively low levels of media freedom. Political pressures have, of course, an impact on reporting practices, as only independent journalists can follow professional standards and recommendations, while those lacking autonomy are bound to engage in reporting practices prescribed by the political elites controlling parts or most of the media (as is the case in Hungary, Poland, and Romania).

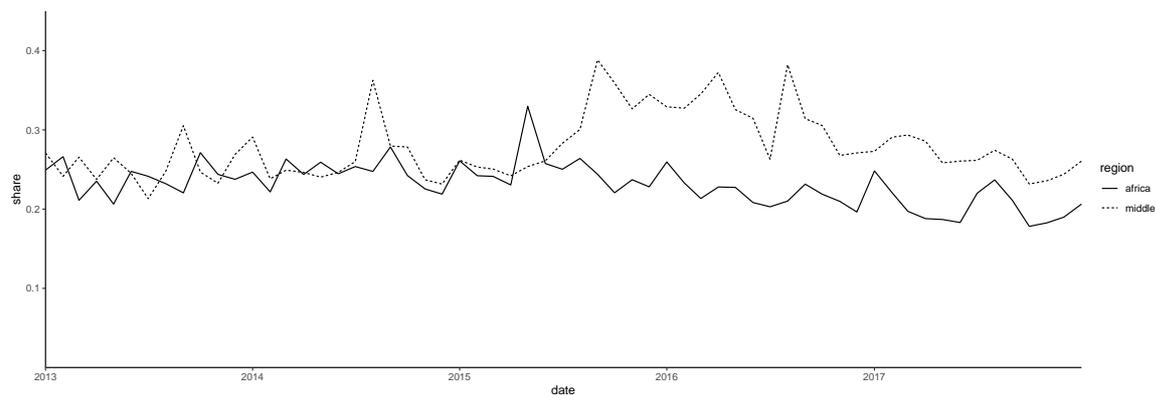
Migration and mobility reporting in Western Europe

Several differences have been found between the northern and southern parts of Western Europe. As a general rule, journalists in the north, including in Germany and Sweden, experience a greater deal of professional autonomy than their counterparts in Spain. Those in the United Kingdom take a middle position. Migration and mobility discourses generally focus on people coming from the Middle East and Africa (see Figure 1). In fact, for most of the time between 2013 and 2017, one or both of these groups are represented in around 25% of the articles about migration. There is furthermore a particular increase in the salience of migrants from the Middle East during the height of the refugee movements of 2015.

In the UK, intra-EU mobility is also a particularly salient issue. This can also be seen in WP8's analysis of the media coverage, where intra-European mobility strongly increases in visibility in UK newspapers starting in 2013 (see Eberl et al. 2019).



Figure 1. Salience of African and Middle Eastern Migrants in European Media Coverage



Note: Groups were identified based on country or nationality specific terms in all seven languages and media corpora. These terms were then combined with migration specific terms. Shares represent the relative number of migration-related articles that mention either group at least once in combination with migration in the same paragraph. Categories are not mutually exclusive, since an article can mention migrants from Africa as well as migrants from the Middle East at the same time. N = 433,866 articles.

Most of the journalists in Germany who cover migration and mobility specialize in these areas (no data is available in this respect for the three other countries). Importantly, journalists in Germany, Spain and Sweden seek to make a distinction between different categories of people on the move, including between those from beyond and within the European Union, as well as between refugees, asylum seekers, and those motivated by other considerations. The United Kingdom is an outlier in this respect, with many journalists failing to distinguish between extra-European and intra-European migrants. When looking at media coverage in more detail, however, across all these countries – and even in the UK – differences in coverage of intra-European versus extra-European migrants are evident. The latter are covered in a more negative manner, and are more often framed in the context of security threats than the first (see Eberl et al 2019).

Interviews with journalists in Western Europe revealed a tendency toward neutral or even positive attitudes toward migration from the Middle East and Africa. They also tend to consider intra-European mobility a general benefit. At the same time, however, they also acknowledge that some major societal problems are linked to both migration and free movement within the European Union. In contrast to this fairly widespread humanitarian approach (sympathizing with migrants), the UK once again was an exception, with the majority of the journalists interviewed focusing on the problems associated with migration and mobility.

The composition of newsrooms seems to be an issue in all four Western European countries, in that the general view among journalists is that it does not reflect the political, cultural and ethnic diversity of their societies.

Migration reporting in Eastern Europe

A recurring issue of migration and mobility reporting in Eastern Europe is a gap between journalistic standards and actual practices. In principle most journalists are committed to the ideal of impartiality. However, actual reporting tends to follow ideological and political lines, as the ideological cleavages dividing political elites and the general public in these highly polarized societies also divide the journalism communities. Few journalists try to mediate between different approaches to, and conceptions of, the public interest. As a general rule, they stress differences rather than similarities between the different poles of society. In terms of migration reporting, a number of news outlets overtly echo the position of political elites, some of which are overtly hostile to migrants, especially in Hungary and Poland. This is in sharp contrast to the self-proclaimed objective, voiced by many journalists, of serving the general public rather than the political elites.

Few news outlets are economically viable and politically independent, while many of them are informally affiliated with political parties. News media are exposed to a great deal of political pressure in Hungary, Poland, and Romania.

Even though, as already noted, Eastern European member states are source and transit rather than destination countries, most of the media coverage there is devoted to *immigration*, while *emigration* seems to be only very rarely discussed in the media. This is at odds with reality, given the large numbers of Hungarians, Romanians, Slovenes and Poles now living in Western Europe on a permanent basis, and the low number of migrants from the Middle East and North Africa staying in Eastern Europe for longer periods of time.

Still, compared to our country sample from Western Europe, intra-European mobility does play a much more important role and is covered more positively in the Eastern European media. Particularly in Poland and Romania, coverage of intra-European migration



is strongly associated with economic and welfare framing, indicative of the opportunities and benefits associated with free movement for these countries. Hungary, however, is an exception here, in that media pay little attention to free movement within Europe compared to the two other Eastern European countries, and intra-European as well as extra-European migration is first of all associated with security threat framing (see Eberl et al. 2019).

All three countries have relatively small media markets (Poland with its nearly 40 million inhabitants being an exception). It follows that most outlets cannot afford to employ journalists specialized on migration, but those reporting on migration cover a wide range of other issues too. This might explain why there is a great deal of conceptual confusion regarding the terminology when reporting on migration. Word choice often implies a deviation from the ideal of objectivity and enhances a particular frame of interpretation. However, journalists themselves have noted that they often fail to distinguish between “immigrants,” “asylum seekers,” “climate migrants,” “economic refugees” and “war refugees,” using these terms interchangeably, and treating all people on the move as a homogeneous group, despite the diversity of their ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds.

Some journalists intentionally use terms with negative connotations to describe people on the move (such as the Hungarian word *migráns* and the Polish word *bisurmani*).³ Reporting based on such stereotypes does not help the public make informed decisions. On the contrary, it may feed xenophobia and even create a moral panic, as a number of atrocities committed against people believed to be migrants in Hungary has shown in recent times. Also, some journalists fail to clearly distinguish between “ordinary” migrants and terrorists, or imply that migrants are associated with street crime or rape. Again, in Hungary and in Romania – and, to a lesser extent, in Poland – migration is very often framed as a security issue. Some of the journalists even echo conspiracy theories voiced by politicians, especially in Hungary and in Poland. In particular, claims regarding the alleged efforts of Hungarian-born American billionaire and philanthropist George Soros to invite migrants

³ Note that such cultural and linguistic specificities render comparative automated approaches to media text analysis particularly difficult. This is particularly true in a context where one and the same word can be a harmless description in one language but a strongly pejorative word in another.



from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe in great numbers are repeated by journalists, without actually checking whether any fact supports these claims or not.

Recommendations

The recommendations below are based on three foundations. First, practically all journalists in the sample share the professional objectives of adequately informing and educating the public, of mediating between different positions, of mitigating extreme views, and of making the world a better place. Second, most codes of ethics suggest that journalists should express sympathy with those facing difficulties and, oftentimes, prejudice. It is held that most people on the move are in a vulnerable position, and therefore deserve protection, including a humanitarian approach by journalists. Third, media coverage was shown to be strongly dominated by negativity and security framing – even coverage of European citizens showed aspects of “othering” (see Eberl et al. 2019 and Galyga et al. 2019).

1. Migration and mobility are without doubt among the most salient issues of our time in Europe. Thus, it is important that the general public be adequately informed about them. For this reason, efforts to employ journalists specialized in this field should be encouraged. Germany is an example of some of the best practices in this respect, while newsrooms in the countries of Eastern Europe should consider investing more in hiring specialized staff. This also explicitly includes giving more room to migrant voices in the media. Both in the coverage as well as in journalistic production.
2. In order not to mislead the general public, journalists ought to distinguish between the different groups of migrants coming from different backgrounds and between different migration processes. Journalists in Germany, Spain and Sweden do make an effort in this respect, while those in the United Kingdom often fail to do so. Particularly during the refugee movements of 2015, many different groups of migrants were lumped together in media coverage. Ethical codes and committees



should focus on this issue in order to enhance efforts at making a clear distinction between different types of migration and mobility and, consequently, between differences in the backgrounds and current positions of the various groups of migrants.

3. Intra-European mobility generally only makes up a very small proportion of migration coverage. Often intra-European mobility and extra-European coverage are discussed in connection to each other. To counteract misperceptions about intra-European mobility, its benefits as well as its possible drawbacks, journalists should give it more visibility and discuss it in more detail on its own. Rather than discussing it in the context of other forms of migration, it should be discussed in terms of other cornerstones of the European Union and European integration more generally.
4. Some news outlets in Hungary and Poland intentionally use terms with negative connotations to describe migrants and link their presence in Europe to crime and terrorism. Such practices go against the standards of responsible journalism and should absolutely be avoided.
5. News outlets focus on conflict and problems, as these aspects of a story generally are of high news value. It is, however, important to avoid any cognitive bias on behalf of the public. Therefore, journalists ought to consider how they could provide their audiences with a more representative and balanced picture of migration and mobility.
6. Journalists in the deeply divided societies of Eastern Europe often enhance, rather than reduce, the differences dividing these societies. Instead, they should make an effort to undertake a mediating role and to help bring about a reasonable and human rights-based consensus on the issue of migration.

We are aware that journalists work in a complex matrix of a variety of influences, including those by political elites, interest groups, and the general public, and that this may make the recommendations above difficult to adopt and comply with. Therefore the recommendations listed here, and especially those regarding the Eastern European countries, primarily serve the purpose of establishing a *normative background* against which



migration and mobility reporting can be assessed, while it is acknowledged that such standards may not easily be translated into actual practices.

However, while it might be very hard for individual journalists to generate great change in the overall organization of their profession, we want to add that these recommendations can also be understood as guidelines for policy change. For example (European) support programs for independent journalism or stronger oversight and consequences for political interference in journalists' work could aid in strengthening and supporting the journalistic ideals held by journalists.



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The REMINDER project is exploring the economic, social, institutional and policy factors that have shaped the impacts of free movement in the EU and public debates about it.

The project is coordinated from COMPAS and includes participation from 12 consortium partners in 8 countries across Europe



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