

European Journalism Observatory and Otto Brenner Stiftung present pilot analysis

## **How do media across Europe cover migrants and refugees?**

Comparative study conducted in 17 countries reveals blind spots – and different narratives

Five years after the start of the “European refugee crisis”, migration controversies have deeply affected political landscapes across the EU, and no “European solutions” have yet been found.

**A new study by the European Journalism Observatory (EJO) now sheds light on the media’s role in the migration debate:** According to EJO’s comparative analysis, media tell different stories about migrants and refugees in every country. Sharp divides in quantity and quality of coverage are not only visible between Western and Central Eastern Europe, but even within Western Europe. The study also reveals many blind spots in the coverage of migrants and refugees.

The EJO, a network of 12 journalism institutes across Europe, analyzed coverage of migrants and refugees in 17 countries. The study has retrieved 2 417 articles for six selected study weeks between August 2015 and March 2018. It is the first international project to compare coverage of migrants and refugees across so many different political systems, media systems, and journalistic cultures. Details of the study, graphs, and a full-length report are available on the EJO [website](#) and on the [website](#) of Otto Brenner Stiftung, who co-funded the study.

With currently 1.1 mio. refugees (according to UNHCR data for 2019), Germany has emerged from the “European refugee crisis” as one of the world’s top five host countries for refugees, along with Uganda, Pakistan, Turkey, and Sudan. According to our study, this unique position has resulted in a specific “German perspective” on the topic: **The sheer quantity of coverage in Germany far outstrips that of almost all other countries in the study – and is only paralleled by Hungary**, whose prime minister Viktor Orbán has positioned himself as an opponent of German chancellor Angela Merkel with regard to asylum policy.

The study also reveals fundamentally different patterns of coverage between Germany, Italy and Greece and all the other EU countries in our sample. **In Germany, Italy and Greece, migrants and refugees are presented as domestic topics**, reflecting the fact that these

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countries are primarily destinations of migrants and refugees. However, **the media in all other EU countries in our sample treat the topic predominantly as a foreign affairs issue – events related to migration take place far away from home**, beyond the domestic borders. Media in France, the UK and Hungary emphasize the prominent role of their leaders in international policy-making. Germans in particular might be surprised to learn that there seems to be little public pressure in other countries to find a “European solution” to the regulation of asylum procedures.

The study also finds stark differences in the tone of coverage in different countries. In general, **media in Central and Eastern Europe focus more on problems experienced with, and protests against, migrants and refugees**. Media in Western European emphasize the situation of migrants and refugees, and the help provided to them. Western European media in our sample also quoted many more (non-migrant) speakers with positive attitudes towards migrants and refugees than media in Central and Eastern Europe. A pattern also emerges when we contrast data for left-liberal media and media with a more conservative profile: **Liberal-left media quoted more speakers with a positive attitude**, and reported considerably more on help for and the situation of migrants and refugees.

**Media also report on immigration from different parts of the world**. Africa is the main point of reference in Italy and to some extent in France. While all other countries in Western Europe focus on immigration from the Middle East, the Italian newspaper *La Stampa* did not publish a single article focusing on migrants or refugees from the Middle East. For media in Russia, Poland, Belarus and Ukraine, migration and refugee flows from Ukraine were also a major topic.

One of the main problems identified in our study is that **media across Europe do not make clear to their audiences the background and legal status of people seeking to enter Europe** as a migrant or refugee. Coverage is dominated by political debates and political actors (45%), leaving almost no room (4% of the articles) for coverage of economic, cultural, historic, and other background information. Only a third of the articles (33%) makes clear the distinction between refugees, who have a protected legal status, and migrants, who leave their countries of origin for economic, social, educational and other reasons. Most articles (60%) confuse migrants and refugees or remain unclear. Do they do this out of ignorance? Because national

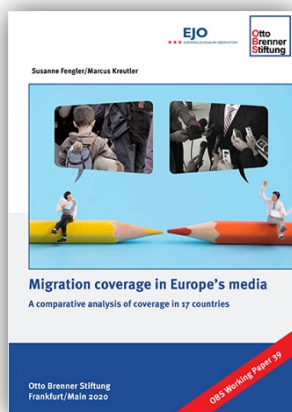
politicians use ambiguous wording? Because journalists assume their audiences don't know the difference – or because they lack the time and space to be more specific? Our study cannot throw light on the reasons; however, **media also remain vague about the countries of origin of migrants and refugees.** Only 778 out of the 2,417 articles retrieved for the study weeks specify where people come from – 293 articles mention Syria, the others “Africa” (64), Myanmar (30), Albania and Ukraine (18 each), and Afghanistan (16). But there is change over time: In the earlier weeks of our analysis, the Middle East as an origin is particularly in focus, and where people are clearly identified, it is mostly as “refugees”; in later weeks, we increasingly find people identified as “migrants”. However, the share of articles that do not identify the people presented as either refugees or migrants remains high throughout our period of analysis.

Asking migrants and refugees about their background and motives might help, but **migrants and refugees tend to be the silent by-standers of migration coverage.** While 26.6% of articles actually feature migrants and refugees as main actors, 18% cover them only as large, anonymous groups. A mere 8% of the articles feature migrants and refugees as individuals or families – while citizens and civil society actors in destination countries are main actors in 18% of the articles. And very few of migrants and refugees featured in the articles are also quoted: Media quoted 411 migrant speakers and 4,267 non-migrant speakers. While helpers are individualized, those receiving help are not. As found in previous studies, **coverage also over-represents male (and also underage) migrants and refugees at the expense of adult females.**

With regard to the representation of migrants and refugees, European media might learn from the United States, which was part of our sample as well. While *The Washington Post* focused mainly on immigration from Central America in the study period, *The New York Times* took more of a global perspective and focused on the “European refugee crisis”. **US articles featured a particularly high number of individual migrants and refugees,** who were also quoted – probably as a result of the Anglo-Saxon reporting traditions and a code of ethics (by the Society of Professional Journalists) that stipulates to “give voice to the voiceless”. In Europe, the Spanish media come closest to this interest in the perspective of migrants and refugees.

**However, the study also shows that public debate around the issue in other countries is often far from being as one-sided as is often assumed.** We also compared the percentage of speakers quoted who had positive attitudes towards migrants and refugees with the percentage of speakers quoted who had negative attitudes. Indeed, **in almost all countries covered by this study, the two media outlets in our sample offered contrary positions.** We conclude from these results that more diverse – or at least less black and white – approaches towards migration issues can be found in the media of each country. Also the Hungarian media, for example, offer a more varied picture than one might expect. *Magyar Hírlap*, closely aligned with the Orbán government, does not quote a single migrant or refugee in its articles in all six study weeks. But on the independent news portal *index.hu*, the situation of migrants and refugees receives more attention, and at least some migrant speakers are quoted.

*Susanne Fengler/Marcus Kreutler: „Migration coverage in Europe’s media – A comparative analysis of coverage in 17 countries“, OBS-Working paper 39, Frankfurt am Main, January 2020*



Reading the working paper online or downloading it:  
<https://www.otto-brenner-stiftung.de>

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