

Policy Brief

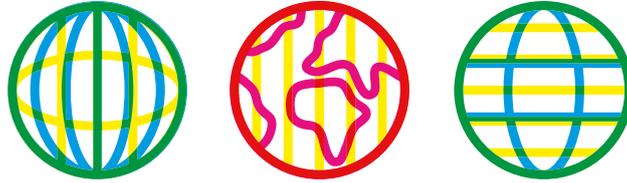
Cross-country comparison of media selection
and attitudes towards narratives on migration

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A stylized graphic of a globe composed of thick, overlapping lines in green, blue, yellow, red, and pink. The lines form a grid-like structure that represents the Earth's latitude and longitude. The globe is positioned in the lower half of the page, with the text 'opportunities' and 'for a fair narrative on migration' overlaid on it.

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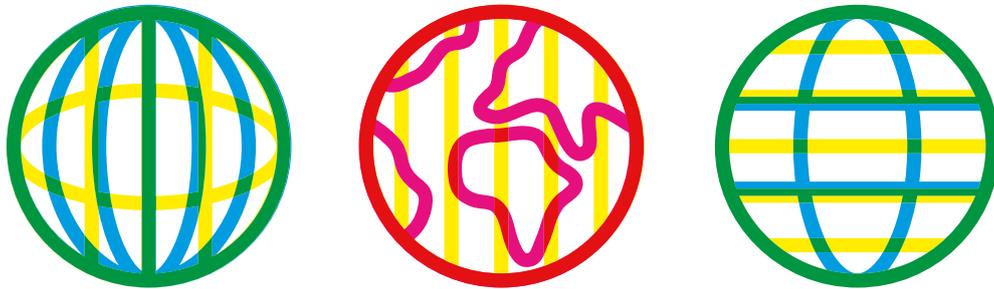
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Cross-country comparison of media selection and attitudes towards narratives on migration

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1. Policy context

For many years, migration has been a highly salient topic in societal and political debates in the European Union (EU). However, since 2015-2016, when a large number of refugees and asylum seekers entered the EU as (amongst others) a result of the Syrian civil war, the situation has increasingly been characterized as a 'crisis' by media and political actors, and as a result, by the public as well. Over time, this crisis narrative has deepened existing cleavages, or opened up new ones within the EU. There was a lack of cross-country coordination in the reception and integration of these many asylum seekers and refugees. Thus, the migration crisis evolved into a crisis of the EU as well. The ambition of the OPPORTUNITIES project is to develop a 'new' narrative on migration that acknowledges that every crisis is also an opportunity: a chance to revisit foundational principles, create new knowledge and initiate forward-looking narrative strategies which allow us to come to terms with a world in flux. Grounded in an ethics of dialogue and a human rights approach, the narrative of OPPORTUNITIES redirects attention to the benefits from migration, as suggested in the European Agenda for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals (2011) and moves towards a more successful integration of migrants. The objectives of the project are eight-fold, but this report focuses on the Task 1 in Work Package (WP) 4, which attempts to provide an answer to the fourth objective of OPPORTUNITIES:

To analyse the changing attitudes of citizens towards migrants in European member states using quantitative methods, and develop a clearer understanding of the cumulative effects and consequences of media selection behaviour on individual attitudinal outcomes when adopting narratives on migration.

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In WP4, titled 'Analysis of changing attitudes and understanding', the main goal is to quantitatively analyze dynamics and outcomes of narratives. This WP is grounded in Slater's (2007) theoretical framework of Reinforcing Spirals. The fundamental premise of this theory is that media selection (i.e., choices made by individuals as to which media they choose to consume) is a dynamic outcome driven by one's beliefs, values, and personal- and collective identity, while at the same time one's beliefs, values, and identity are mutually influenced by one's media use. These reciprocal associations move forward in time and produce reinforcing or cumulative effects. These dynamic spirals of media selectivity and influences are considered to be particularly strong in social groups and networks that seek closure to outside perspectives and influences (cf. 'echo chambers', see also Sunstein, 2007). In such closed and often ideologically homogeneous communication systems, selective exposure to media and information as well as selective avoidance generate polarized and extremist beliefs and behaviors, while such beliefs and behaviors would in turn result in a greater likelihood of seeking out more polarized and extremist mediated (as well as interpersonal) communication experiences. With this task, we seek to contribute to a better understanding of the role of (news) media consumption in the development of public attitudes in four European countries towards a "Black Swan" event: the arrival of millions of refugees in Europe – many of which travelled through or towards the countries under study – in 2014/2015. Furthermore, the results of this task will show if and how public attitudes differ between residents of a non-compliance country (Hungary) and those who live in countries who are compliant with EU law.





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2. Methodology

Public opinion research may be conducted in various ways, but one of the most common methods is survey research. In this methodology, researchers pose a set of questions – either online or face-to-face – to participants. Although the (often closed question) format has some drawbacks, the main advantage is that it provides a relatively easy and, in the case of online surveys, cost-effective methodology to gather data among a large sample of the population. It is a widely used methodology to assess public attitudes, as evidenced by large-scale, high-quality European studies like the European Social Survey or the Eurobarometer that both utilize survey research.

The current survey was fielded to investigate the dynamic interplay between media representations of and narratives on different migrant groups and the governmental and societal (re)actions on the other. With these data, we provide more insight into these societal reactions by investigating attitude formation. Through an online survey, we collected quantitative data on attitudes towards outgroups (e.g., immigrants, refugees), exposure to and trust in news media, intergroup contact, and political attitudes (e.g., right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation) among the adult population aged 25 to 65 in four European countries: Austria, Germany, Hungary, and Italy. We collected the data in cooperation with Bilendi, a Belgian polling agency, and selected the methodology for its cost-effectiveness in cross-country research. Respondents received an e-mail asking them to participate in a survey without specifying the subject matter, which was essential to avoid priming. Three weeks of fieldwork in May and June of 2021 resulted in a dataset of 6,065 respondents (a little over 1,500 per country).

3. Results

In Table 1, we conducted a partial correlation analysis (controlling for country) to investigate how different news media consumption variables are associated with outgroup attitudes. In order to enable cross-country comparison, we use the aggregated quality and popular newspaper/website consumption. An analysis per country can be found in the appendices, in which the individual newspaper/digital news indicators were used. Table 1 shows that news media consumption is associated with feelings towards immigrants, refugees, and Muslims in several ways. Regarding television news consumption, correlation coefficients show that consumption of public service and local news is associated with positive sentiments towards these outgroups, while commercial news consumption is associated with negative sentiments. The link between radio news and sentiments is weaker: only the consumption of public service radio news is (positively) associated with outgroup sentiments. Although different newspapers and digital news outlets adopt different narratives to talk about migrants and migration, the effects of newspaper and digital news consumption are relatively uniform. This was confirmed by additional correlation analyses that related 1) the correlation between newspapers and outgroup attitudes with 2) the correlation of digital news outlets and attitudes. The result was – in all countries and for all outlets with both an online and offline version – clear: correlation coefficients exceeded .85 in all cases and .90 in most, which indicates that the effect of (the same) offline and online outlets on attitudes are highly similar. Consuming news on quality outlets is strongly associated with more positive sentiments towards immigrants, refugees, and Muslims. However, and perhaps contrary to some expectations, consuming news on popular outlets is also associated with positive attitudes in some instances, although the link is weaker than for quality outlets.

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When individuals hold greater perceived threat towards refugees, they also hold more negative attitudes. Although the link between all threat variables and sentiments is negative, it is most pronounced for the item regarding refugees' threat towards the country's cultural life: when respondents believe refugees will threaten their culture, their attitudes towards refugees and other outgroups will be negative.





Table 1. Partial correlation analysis of outgroup attitudes with news media consumption, and perceived threat (N = 6,065), controlled for country

	Feelings: Immigrants	Feelings: Refugees	Feelings: Muslims
Television consumption			
Public service news	.07***	.11***	.04**
Commercial news	-.07***	-.05***	-.07***
Local news	.07***	.06***	.06***
Radio consumption			
Public service news	.09***	.10***	.08***
Commercial news	.01	-.01	-.00
Local news	.03*	.01	.02
Newspaper consumption			
Quality newspapers	.17***	.18***	.18***
Popular newspapers	.03**	.02	.06***
Digital news consumption			
Quality news websites	.16***	.17***	.17***
Popular news websites	.07***	.07***	.07***
Outgroup attitudes			
Perceived threat: more crime	-.38***	-.43***	-.42***
Perceived threat: jobs	-.47***	-.51***	-.48***
Perceived threat: social benefits	-.56***	-.64***	-.60***
Perceived threat: economy	-.59***	-.66***	-.60***
Perceived threat: cultural life	-.62***	-.69***	-.66***
Perceived threat: values	-.21***	-.22***	-.21***

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.



4. Policy recommendations

The OPPORTUNITIES survey will be an excellent resource to formulate recommendations on different trajectories towards positive outcomes. Based on our data collection so far, these are four policy recommendations that deserve attention:

- Link between traditional media consumption and attitudes towards immigrants should be kept in mind when thinking of policy initiatives.
- It is crucial to dare to think out of the box because "groups" are not homogeneous: diversity in attitudes in terms of age, gender, political ideology, and social and economic background needs to be addressed.
- Heavy consumers of commercial media hold rather negative attitudes, while heavy consumers of public service media hold rather positive attitudes. The attitudes of these media users may be linked to the differential framing of migrants/migration on these media. It is important to create awareness among audiences and media professionals on how their framing of these vulnerable groups is linked to public attitudes.
- As cultural and national contexts vary, policies are needed at the national level, in addition to the European level, to address growing polarization.





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