Policy Brief

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Improving mainstream media reporting on migration

Towards a more balanced and inclusive coverage

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● **Executive Summary**

Reporting on migration by mainstream media often focuses on negative news and lacks the perspective of migrants. Fact-based, nuanced and inclusive coverage on migration by mainstream media is ever more important since misinformation on migration easily spreads on social media. As quality control in the media depends heavily on self-regulation by journalists and media enterprises, we recommend to 1. strengthen trainings for journalists, 2. foster collaboration between research and media, 3. finance migrant-led media, 4. incentivise inclusive hiring practices at media corporations and 5. to share best-practices in media policy guidelines across national boundaries for improving the quality and inclusiveness of reporting on migration.

● Introduction

As stated in objective 17 of the United Nations Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018), there is a need to ***eliminate all forms of discrimination and promote evidence-based public discourse to shape perceptions of migration***. We argue that mainstream media plays an important role in shaping this discourse. While new actors gain ground in influencing the public debate, such as influencers with a large followership on social media, activists, podcasters or online conspiracy groups, the role of traditional broadcasters on radio, TV and newspapers cannot be neglected. To the contrary, as the internet becomes a playground for disinformation and misinformation, the quality of reporting of mainstream media is all the more important to offer access to fact-based information. Mainstream media acts in an agenda-setting way, it gives 'importance' to topics and frames them in a specific way. Given that the mainstream media has some weaknesses in the quality and balance in reporting on migration, as will be discussed in this brief, the question to be asked is

- ***How can high-quality, fact-based and balanced reporting be fostered in mainstream media?***

The issue is delicate, due to two reasons. First, regulating media messaging raises concerns of censorship. Second, the issue of shaping perceptions of migration is highly complex. It requires an understanding of how audiences' perceptions are shaped. ***Even fact-based reporting on migration can distort public perception. The key issue here is framing*** (Goffmann, 1974): migration can be reported as a common activity of people all around the world that brings benefits to migrants and host societies, for example, by providing the necessary work force in key sectors. On the other hand, it can be reported as a threat to migrants and/or host societies, by focusing on the dangers associated with (irregular) migration, such as human trafficking, dangerous migration routes and/or the financial benefit for organized crime. ***Evidence-based reporting hence also needs to consider a balance of positive and***

Key Issues:

- *The UN promotes evidence-based public discourse to shape perceptions on migration*

- *Despite the rising importance of social media, mainstream media remains an important source of information*

- *Regulating the media raises concerns of censorship*

- *Even fact-based reporting can warp perceptions of migration*

- *Framing and balanced reporting are key*

negative news stories that reflects the complexity of the phenomenon of migration.

This policy brief discusses the role of mainstream media in shaping perceptions of migration, and provides recommendations for the improvement of the quality of reporting on migration in mainstream media.

● The role of mainstream media in shaping perceptions of migration

While it is difficult to point to causal effects of the media on a populations' perception of a certain phenomenon, research suggests that frequent exposure to negative media messages on migration can lead to negative perceptions regarding migration and migrant groups, and can influence voting behaviour. Since *media reports in Europe on the topic of migration are predominantly negative* and focus on conflict (Eberl et al., 2018), this suggests that the media can have a negative impact on public perceptions of migration and migrants. Media coverage was particularly negative in 2015/2016, when the media coined the influx of Syrian refugees to Europe a "migration crisis", repeating stereotypes and leading to an emphasis on differences between "us" and "them" (Arcimaviciene & Baglama, 2018), rather than a focus on commonalities or a discussion of migration as a global phenomenon. PERCEPTIONS research found that migrants were harmed and faced challenges when coming to Europe if negatively stereotyped, e.g., in the form of criminalisation, racism, and hate crime. Overly negative reporting may contribute to this stereotyping.

However, variations across nation states exist. A comparison between European countries shows that press coverage on migration differs, with news coverage on migration in 2015 in the UK being more negative than in Sweden for example (Berry et al., 2015). In a more recent study, media coverage on migration was more negative in Central and Eastern Europe compared to

Key Findings:

● *Media reports on migration are predominantly negative*

● *Reporting on the "migration crisis" disseminated stereotypes*

Western Europe (Fengler & Kreutler, 2020). Reporting during the COVID-pandemic was mixed. Examples of positive news stories on migration concerned the role of migrants as essential workers in the health care sector. However, often migrants were portrayed as a health risk and potential spreaders of the virus across borders (ICMPD, 2022).

Dominant media discourses on migration focus on refugees and asylum seekers, thereby providing a limited perspective on migration as a common practice in the EU, considering for example labour migration within the EU. Overall, the focus on negative aspects of migration (and especially the focus on potential threats to the host society), and the strong presence of the topic in mainstream media since 2015, pave the way for an overestimation of risks associated with migration, and a negative perception of the impact of migration on societies and of migrants themselves in Europe. This phenomenon is most relevant when direct contact with migrants and access to their perspectives is missing. As shown by PERCEPTIONS research, practitioners who work directly with migrants had a better understanding of migrants' aims, drivers and views (of Europe) compared to practitioners who did not interact with migrants in their daily work. However, when direct exchange with migrants is limited, perceptions of migrants and migration are to a large extent derived from external sources, such as the media. Therefore, mainstream media coverage needs to make a strong effort not to perpetuate stereotypes and one-sided reports, which cannot be put to the test in real-life settings. Moreover, research suggests that audience in rural areas and audience with lower socio-economic background are more receptive to populist discourse on migration (ICMPD, 2022).

One-sided or unbalanced news coverage is exacerbated by the fact that migrants are underrepresented in the media, which means that their voices and perspective are underreported. Lack of representation can have a negative effect on migrants' trust in the media. Moreover, mainstream media often does not cater to the information needs of migrants for example by providing information in migrants' languages. While some news corporations have ventured into this field (InfoMigrants.net is one example of a collaboration of

- *The discourse on migration as a crisis leads to an overestimation of the associated risks*

- *Migrants' voices are underrepresented*

major European media companies in France, Germany and Italy which aims at providing migrants with verified and balanced news), it can be challenging for newly arrived migrants to get access to verified information. Indeed, PERCEPTIONS research confirms that – depending on the topic – migrants regularly access informal sources of information such as family members, friends, and affective networks (e.g., on social media) who are perceived as trustworthy. Formal sources such as governmental websites, mainstream media, and NGOs are consulted when looking for specific information (Bermejo & Carrasco, 2021).

Another key issue is the fragmentation and polarization of the media. The fragmentation of audiences who turn to media that fits their political view has led to an increase in polarization both in the media and in the public (Hollander, 2008) due to selective exposure to information. In this process, the tabloid press plays an important role, contributing to the polarization of the topic of migration while trying to monetize the issue of migration for increasing audiences through shocking reporting. In a similar vein, the instrumentalization of negative public perceptions of migration for political gains has to be acknowledged. Some media corporations and political parties have a vested interest in focusing on negative aspects of migration, thereby distorting the reality of the issue.

In sum, mainstream media is one of the factors that can influence the perceptions of migration in the context of a fragmented media landscape and political polarization of the topic.

- *A polarized and fragmented media landscape adds to the issue*

● Gaps in existing frameworks for fair and balanced media

A number of frameworks for a free and fair press, such as rules by national media regulatory authorities and code of ethics by journalist associations are already in place in many European countries. These rules and guidelines apply to any reporting, including reporting on migration. However, there are some gaps in the existing frameworks and challenges inherent in the effectiveness of such frameworks.

Key Findings:

- *Balanced reporting often depends on self-regulation and awareness of journalist*

First, many guidelines are not binding. Existing guidelines can be divided into two categories: 1) legal frameworks that provide binding rules for journalists and media outlets which are usually limited to issues of libel, protection of youth and the right of reply (Fengler et al., 2011); 2) ethical and quality guidelines by which journalists should abide voluntarily. The second category relies on self-regulation of journalists, journalist interest groups and media enterprises.

Second, media policy is, to a large extent, a national affair and rules vary from country to country. This makes it difficult to implement standards across the EU. A recent attempt by the European Commission to introduce policy to protect media pluralism and independence in the EU – the European Media Freedom Act (European Commission 2022) – received backlash by some member states, journalists and publishers (Goujard, 2022). While the initiative aims at challenging the influence and pressure of governments on the media in countries like Hungary and Poland, journalists and governments are wary of negative effects on the freedom of the press if media oversight becomes a centralized responsibility of the EU.

● *Standardisation across EU member states is difficult.*

The EU already provides some policy guidance in that it advocates for media pluralism, which includes measures to deliver diverse content and to ensure that different actors and opinions get the chance to be voiced in the media (The Council of the European Union, 2020). Media pluralism is centred on four core issues: fundamental protection, market plurality, political independence and social inclusiveness. Market plurality and political independence are threatened by concentration of mainstream media ownership, and sometimes the lack of transparency on editorial lines (Craufurd et al., 2021). The Euromedia Ownership Monitor points to varying degree of media ownership concentration and transparency in the EU. To this date, ownership regulations in the EU have not succeeded in breaking down oligopolistic media structures (Trappel & Meier, 2022). Media companies also lack inclusiveness. According to the latest reports of the media pluralism monitor, women are under-represented in management positions and minority groups are underrepresented in the media (air-time is not proportionate to their population size). Finally, there are not enough regulatory

● *The EU advocates for media pluralism. However, the responsibility to safeguard pluralism still lies with member states.*

frameworks in place to address the issue of disinformation and hate speech. However, positive examples can be found in Germany and Finland, where frameworks against disinformation have been successfully implemented (Bleyer-Simon et.al., 2021: 156).

Given the differences in national media landscapes, media regulation and codes of conduct, the role of the EU should facilitate knowledge sharing across member states, to provide guidance on best practices which can then be adapted to the local context.

Third, inclusive and high-quality reporting also requires adequate funding. Subsidies for the press are a common practice in EU countries. Either, media enterprises get indirect subsidies through reduction of VAT, and/or they can apply for direct subsidies (Deutscher Bundestag, 2019). While the aim of these subsidies is to strengthen the quality and diversity of the press and to support the digital transition of print-based media (for example in Austria), the distribution of funds has been criticized as lacking transparency. Moreover, it has been alleged that media outlets which reported positively about the government have received (more) funding. Therefore, these tools need fine-tuning and better oversight.

- *Adequate funding is needed for inclusive and high-quality reporting.*

While some of the current shortcomings will be more difficult to come by, such as an EU-wide strategy for quality reporting or stricter (binding) rules for balanced reporting, some steps can be taken on the national and local level to improve mass media reporting on migration. We suggest the following 5 recommendations to extent the existing guidelines and practices for quality reporting in mainstream media.

● Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Provide training and awareness raising for journalists on balanced reporting

Dedicated training for journalists which raises awareness of problematic reporting on migration issues and its impact on perceptions of migration, as well as migrants' perceptions, can provide journalists and journalism students with added skills to improve balanced reporting. The UNESCO Handbook for Journalism Educators (Fengler et al., 2021) and the handbook on migration reporting for journalists (ICMPD, 2021) provide good resources in this regard.

Recommendation 2: Foster cooperation between journalism and research

To avoid negative framing and to foster better contextualization of migration policy debates, reporting on migration can benefit from acknowledging recent migration research findings. However, scientific results may be difficult to interpret for non-academic audience. Closer cooperation between researchers and journalists can help to avoid misunderstanding and bring the public's attention to state-of-the-art insights, particularly the outcomes of EU-funded Research and Innovation projects.

Recommendation 3: Provide incentives to media companies for hiring journalists with migration background

Journalism benefits from diverse perspectives. As the media is still dominated by a relatively homogenic workforce, which does not necessarily reflect the diversity of backgrounds of their audience, public incentives to hire journalists with migration background can boost diversity in the workplace and in reporting. In addition, governments should issue grants for highly-skilled students with migration background who wish to get an education in journalism or want to compete internships at a media company. In turn, a more diverse workforce can also increase the ability of the media to reach audiences with a migration background and provide them with high quality and trusted information.

Key recommendations:

- *Training of journalists*

- *Foster cooperation between journalism and research*

- *Incentives for hiring and educating migrant journalists*

Recommendation 4: Finance migrant-led news outlets and news for migrants

Provide financial support for high-quality news outlets that give voice to migrants' perspectives and provide a more in-depth and personal account of migrants lives in host communities. Migrant-led newspapers, magazines, radio stations and TV channels can add to the diversity of the media landscape, provide important insights that can be taken up by mainstream news outlets and can cater to specific needs of migrant audiences, for example by providing information in migrants' native languages or by addressing issues that are particularly relevant to migrant communities. The financing of smaller, high-quality media outlets also contributes to countering the prevalence of media ownership concentration in EU countries.

- *Fund migrant-led news outlets*

Recommendation 5: Share best practices of media policies across countries

As media policy is expected to remain mainly a national affair, the EU can step up its role in sharing best practices across member states, so media legislation and media policy can be guided by knowledge on what has worked in which national contexts. Since the media landscapes are rapidly developing, strategies to ensure high-quality reporting on migration issues, combating misinformation on migration and the polarization of the issue can be better developed by drawing from experiences in other member states.

- Share best practices across countries

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